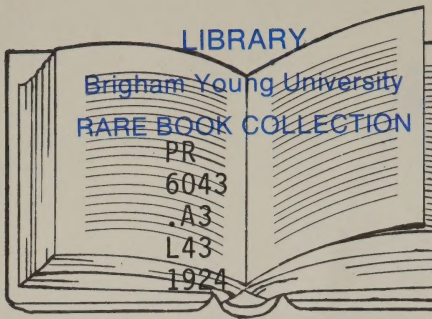


LEAVES
FROM ARCADY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



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*Pres to dedication
daughter*

To
Maud Heathcote, her son
with the author's best love.
Christmas, 1924.

LEAVES FROM ARCADY

By

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

Author of "The Hill"; "Quinneys'," etc. etc.



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To

MY SISTER,

LUCY LYTTTELTON HEATHCOTE

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FOREWORD

As may be inferred from the title, the short stories in this book are just leaves picked up here and there in the noble Forest where I have lived and worked for the past quarter of a century. Some characters appear and reappear. I am glad to say that "Uncle" is still alive and can carry with dignity the burden of his years, and a tankard of ale.

Any author who attempts to transcribe "dialect" should be dealt with leniently even by the hypercritical; for there is nothing more difficult of achievement. Our Forest dialect is quaint and pleasing to the ear because of its odd rising inflexions, which obviously cannot be reproduced. It is seldom heard save from the lips of the "granfers," and ten years hence will not be heard at all.

One story, "The Empty Pew," served as a preliminary sketch for my novel, "The Soul of Susan Yellam." Few short stories lend themselves to amplification. Possibly in this case the sketch is better than the picture. Readers of both can form their own opinion.

I make no apology for my nomenclature of places easily recognizable by those who know the New Forest. I was urged to set down the right names, but no story-teller can do this with impunity. He becomes instantly a slave to topography. One mistake, however trivial, provokes a tiresome correspondence. And so, I have trod humbly in the steps of that great master Thomas Hardy. Once, in conversation with

Foreword

him, I ventured to say that I thought I had discovered a certain heath gloriously described. Hardy smiled. "Many persons," he murmured, "know where that heath is, but I—I don't know."

In the remoter hamlets of the New Forest are old men and women who have never trafficked so far afield as Southampton ; there are tracks and lanes undefiled by the monstrous chars-à-bancs ; there are children who hide in the bracken when they catch a glimpse of a stranger.

In such sanctuaries I have made these gleanings.

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL.

Coley, 1924,

LEAVES FROM ARCADY

THE LOVELY LADY

I

SUSIE was playing with a rag doll when the lovely lady first rose above her horizon. The lady asked questions which exacted bashful answers. Obviously she knew more about Susie than Susie knew about her. But, at the ripe age of six, one takes pleasant people for granted. When the child rushed home after the adventure to be confronted with the insistent: "Who was she?" only one reply was forthcoming: "Fairy godmother." Plain, hardworking folk had to accept a golden-haired creature—Susie was positive about the golden hair—arrayed in white, who seemed to have dropped out of the blue. The inevitable: "How did *she* come?" provoked the artless: "I 'specks she flowed." The child deemed her to be one of the immortals, although she carried chocolates. Susie's people had to take Susie's word for them, because, like the Spanish Fleet, they were out of sight; but, tightly clasped in a hot little hand, lay an authentic sovereign, swiftly slipped into an uncompromising money-box, where it remained for many years a constant reminder of the lovely lady.

Susie was nearly twelve years old when she appeared again, just as unexpectedly. Susie failed to recognize her. But when the lady smiled and spoke in a soft caressing voice the little girl knew that somehow, somewhere, she had seen that smile and heard that voice before.

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The soft voice asked more questions. Susie answered them less bashfully. When full illumination came to her she said excitedly :

"You're my fairy godmother."

"Really? You *do* remember me? "

"What you give me is still in my money-box."

"And we met here."

Susie nodded, too breathless to speak. Down the road, not a hundred yards distant, stood a grey-and-silver motor. The village where Susie lived lay on the outskirts of the Forest of Ys. Fine beech trees bordered the common where the boys played football and cricket. The girls played under the trees in summer time after school was over.

"I gave you some chocolates? "

Susie nodded again.

"Would you like to have tea with me? "

Susie nodded for the third time, not daring to mention that it would be a second tea. She followed the lady to the motor, from which a mysterious basket was taken by the chauffeur and deposited in a shady and secluded spot. Susie hoped that some of her friends would behold her, but a sanctuary had been chosen hidden by tall bracken. The chauffeur went back to the car. Susie ate and drank and prattled as the minutes flew. It transpired presently that an overwhelming ambition obsessed her mind. She wanted a bicycle. At her present rate of saving she might hope to possess one in fifty years. She explained further, beneath discreet pressure, that the school-house was two miles away. With a bicycle of her very own she would have more time to help mother.

"You are a good little girl? "

There was the faintest inflexion of interrogation, and uplifted brows.

"Sometimes," replied Susie guardedly.

The lady blew a tiny whistle. The chauffeur pushed his way through the nodding ferns, packed

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the tea basket, and disappeared with it. The lady took from a wonderful golden bag a still more wonderful box. She lighted a cigarette. Susie had smoked brown-paper cigarettes, with an occasional whiff or two of the genuine article tendered awkwardly by some boy. Unhappily mother held strong views on the subject, but even she admitted that real ladies smoked cigarettes—the squire's wife, for instance. And the "gipper" women smoked pipes! Nevertheless, in some queer unexplored corner of Susie's mind she was measurably upset because the lovely lady used tobacco. She asked politely :

"Do you drink beer, ma'am?"

"Beer? Why do you ask me if I drink beer? But I do—sometimes."

Her laughter tinkled deliciously.

"Father says 'baccy and beer go together."

"I prefer tea," replied the fairy godmother. She rose up, smiling. "Shut your eyes!" she commanded.

Susie did so.

"Open your hands."

After a thrilling interval Susie reopened her eyes to find a tiny parcel in hands which were not too clean.

"That," said the lady, "is the bicycle. But it won't turn into a bicycle for a little time. Don't undo the packet till I am gone."

She kissed the wondering face upturned to hers, saying softly :

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home!"

Susie stared at her.

"Do you like me, child?"

"'Course I do."

"Why?"

"'Cause you smell so sweet."

Susie reached her mother's kitchen some ten minutes later, flushed and out of breath. Mother undid the packet.

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After Susie had gone to bed two persons, lacking in humour and imagination, stared grimly at each other.

"What does it mean?" asked Mrs. Breed.

Tom Breed scratched his head.

"I dunno," he answered truthfully.

"She ain't going back on her pledged word, is she?"

"I thinks the world and all of Susie—as you knows—but——"

"She's ours," said the woman fiercely; "ours! If so be as God A'mighty had pleased to send us kids of our own, would we 'ave loved 'em and tended 'em any better?"

"I dunno," said Tom again.

He smoked his pipe. As a gardener—not of the highest class—he had to concern himself with the future. Every bulb, for example, that passed through his horny hands represented a potential flower—a thing of superlative beauty. Nevertheless, the present engrossed his energies. Rarely did he stray beyond the passing hour. Even now, confronted with an emergency, constrained reluctantly to consider it under the dominating pressure of a faithful wife, his mind moved tranquilly in its accustomed groove. He grasped the fact that Ellen was "tarr'bly upset," but he decided that most women were subject to "flustrations." They came and went, like the swallows.

Thirteen years before something unexpected, and, in a sense, disintegrating, had happened to this good, stolid fellow. At the time he was under-gardener, at a minimum wage, to a gentleman connected with the theatrical profession who leased a pretentious house in Surbiton. Ellen happened to be nurse in the same not too well regulated establishment. They

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came from Melshire, and had been engaged to each other for many years. Each contemplated marriage as an inevitable end to innumerable "walkings out." It would be untrue to affirm that Romance had never touched this simple pair. Romance, at any rate, had inspired in each fidelity to the other. They had "walked out" for fifteen years. Breed was thirty-six; and Ellen admitted that she might be a year or two older than Tom.

Suddenly marriage was dangled before their dazed eyes. Marriage—and something else.

Tom Breed remembered perfectly the afternoon when Ellen, after imposing portentous vows of secrecy, had submitted a proposition. Briefly, her young lady had got into what is called "trouble." Theatrical gentlemen are accustomed to deal drastically with trouble. They have to cut losses at a moment's notice. The young lady in question had just made a "hit" on the musical comedy stage. Critics affirmed that "she had come to stay."

When this information was poured into Tom Breed's ears by Ellen he accepted it unhesitatingly. He accepted also Ellen's assurance that she was prepared to do anything to help Miss Clem. He hadn't the vaguest notion how Miss Clem could be helped.

Ellen enlightened him.

Miss Clem's father had sent for her. The proposition briefly was this: Two discreet persons were offered the immediate prospect of matrimony, with a baby (sex as yet undetermined) thrown in. With the baby went a snug sum of money and the freehold of a small cottage in their native village remote from Surbiton. The baby was to be theirs inalienably. The mother of the baby pledged herself never to claim it in this uncertain world. It was to be a Breed!

Tom scratched his head and said nothing. Ellen talked volubly.

Finally he muttered:

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"It don't seem right, dearie."

Ellen replied quickly :

"You get me, Tom, and a cottage, and five hundred pound. I get a bit of Miss Clem. I shall never see her again, pore darling ! And—and there it is."

There it was—to take or leave.

Ultimately they took it. And "it," in due time, presented itself as a baby girl, who took a masterful grip of Tom's finger before she was a month old.

We skip six years.

The first appearance of the fairy godmother aroused but slight misgiving. The golden-haired lady might have been one of the innumerable birds of passage who flit through the Forest of Ys. At the second "coming," conviction fell upon Ellen. Birds of passage don't drop bicycles upon little girls. And Susie was of an age to describe the visitor. Doubt fled before her description.

Ellen shed tears; Tom smoked his pipe. Possibly the goddess Nicotina helped him. He said presently :

"I says this means nothink—nothink."

"You ain't a woman."

"No, thank Gawd !"

"She'll come again—and again. She was allers a sweet loving-like creature; yes, she was."

"And lucky."

"What do you mean by luck?" asked Ellen.

Luck was associated in the mind of Tom Breed with picture post cards and big cars. Both Ellen and he were well aware that Susie's real mother was now a celebrity, and really Time seemed to have stood still with her, judging by the picture post cards. However, he smoked on in contemplative silence. Ellen answered her own question :

"Is it lucky to bring a beautiful baby into this wicked world and lose it? Why, the thought of losing Susie tears me to flinders. What did Miss Clem think to-day, when she kissed her own little 'un?"

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"I dunno."

"How could you know? But I'll tell you. She'll want to kiss her again. And she will. Lucky! We've been the lucky ones. And the luck is goin' to turn."

Tom permitted himself one observation:

"I take it, dearie, that we has to carry on, rain or shine. I says one thing more—a reel lady bides by her given word."

To this Ellen replied with acerbity:

"You men takes a lot for granted. I ain't sure that Miss Clem ever was a reel lady. Call her just a bit o' flesh and blood and ha' done wi' it."

Tom, acquiescing, refilled his pipe.

3

Ellen was certain, in her own mind, that Miss Clem would pay her a visit.

She did.

The pair met after the lapse of many years. Miss Clem walked up to the cottage about three, when she knew that Tom would be at work and Susie at school.

She kissed her old nurse and sat down in a snug little parlour, secretly the pride of Ellen's heart. Ellen gazed at Miss Clem almost speechless, partly because she had changed so little, and partly because she had changed so much. Let it be remembered that Ellen had loved devotedly this pretty sinner, who had returned her love.

"I'd ha' known you anywheres," gasped Ellen.

"I saw the child yesterday, and I had to come to see you."

"Yes—I guessed you would."

"She's a perfect darling."

Ellen said nothing. Tears trickled down her cheeks. The great change in Miss Clem terrified her.

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She looked—somebody. Ellen realized, in dumb misery, that she herself was nobody. Presently Miss Clem would say gently: "I want my child." And protest would be futile.

"She looks healthy and happy and wise."

"We done our best," murmured Ellen.

"I was a fool to give her up," continued Miss Clem. "Father had his own way about that. I was fairly up against it, and had to submit."

"Yes," assented Ellen miserably.

"I'm stopping at the Bell Inn, Puddenhurst," continued Miss Clem. "In three weeks I begin rehearsals for the new comedy. Afterwards I'm booked for an American tour. Meanwhile is there any reason why I shouldn't enjoy, if I can, Susie's society?"

Ellen said desperately:

"No good 'll come of it, Miss Clem."

"How do you know?"

"I just feels that way."

"You would rather not lend her to me."

"So onsettling," murmured Ellen. "I mind me when Tom first took me to the theayter. I wanted to go again. I mind me when I was confirmed. I was thinking o' my white frock wi' pink ribands, not—not o' the laying on o' hands."

"All right, Ellen. I must play the game with you."

"If you please, Miss Clem."

Unhappily Miss Clem was accustomed to having her own way, and her "way," admittedly, captivated the great British public. It would be unkind to call her selfish. The word "thoughtless" will serve. She had the generous instincts that distinguish so many members of her profession. With her to have a good time included giving a good time. It tickled her fancy to play fairy godmother to her own child regardless of consequences.

Ellen remained silent, torn by conflicting emotions. She believed Miss Clem to be rich, and

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money assumes colossal proportions in the minds of the poor. Miss Clem might leave money to Susie.

Finally, she said in a hard voice :

"If you wants to have her——"

"For a few days."

"Maybe I'd ought to let her go. It'll make talk, lots o' talk."

"As to that," replied Miss Clem, "why not tell half the truth. You and Tom worked for my father for many years. When you married it was understood that I was to be godmother to Susie. As her godmother I give her a holiday. Why not?"

Ellen assented mournfully. School would be over in a few days. Susie could go to the Bell Inn at Puddenhurst for a week.

"She ain't got proper clothes, Miss Clem."

"That will be my affair."

"You ain't thinking of taking her from us?"

"Good heavens—no! What an idea!"

"Susie may not want to go."

Miss Clem answered promptly :

"Shall we leave that to her?"

Ellen nodded. A spark of hope was kindled in her faithful bosom. Susie had never left home; she was shy in the presence of strangers, and she had a will of her own. Deep down in Ellen's heart lay the conviction that Susie would, somehow, justify the tender care expended on her.

"She'll be herealong if so be as you can wait half an hour."

Miss Clem waited. During that brief half-hour she recaptured Ellen. How she did it, who can say? Ellen said to Tom afterwards :

"When she thanked me, I cried like a child."

"And you ain't the sloppy sort, neither."

"She wasn't play-actin', Tom."

"Hay?"

"She cried, too, poor dear!"

"Dearie me! What a showery afternoon!"

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Susie came back from school rather tired and cross. She expressed mild surprise at the sight of Miss Clem, but, obviously, was more concerned with the satisfaction of carnal appetites. If "comp'ny" stayed to tea there would be cakes, and perhaps honey.

Both were provided.

During tea Miss Clem astounded the child by telling her half the truth.

"Your mother," she said, "was my nurse. She bath'd me. She taught me to say my prayers. I dare say they were the same prayers you say to her."

"Just about the same," admitted Ellen.

Susie became pop-eyed with interrogation.

"Do you say the same prayers, ma'am?"

"Not quite the same," answered Miss Clem. "When I was naughty your mother spanked me, good and hard, too."

"Mother don't spank me," said Susie triumphantly.

Ellen and Miss Clem exchanged glances. And Ellen's glance was eloquent of everything left unsaid. It established her position. Miss Clem understood that this hard-featured elderly woman had been unable to spank Susie, although the temptation to do so must have been strong. However, Ellen assigned another reason for this abstention:

"Tom says that more naughtiness is spanked into a child than out of it."

"Father," said Susie, "don't say much, but he thinks an awful lot." Then, suddenly bashful, she continued hesitatingly: "Ought I to call you Miss Clem, as mother does?"

"You call 'er ma'am," said Ellen peremptorily. Then, with terror clutching her, she went on: "This lady is your godmother. That's why she gave you money to buy a bicycle."

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"Will she learn me my catechism?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Clem.

"You will please remember that she is very different from the likes of us."

"I am indeed," said Miss Clem.

Susie assimilated this, and nodded sagaciously.

"Mother used to bath me once a week. I baths meself now."

"Ma'am——"

"Pardon! I baths meself now, ma'am."

In Miss Clem's considered opinion the right moment had come. Susie was feeling the better for her tea, and at ease with her godmother.

"Would you like to pay me a little visit?"

It was, perhaps, characteristic of the speaker that she attempted no wiles with the child. Susie had been kissed lightly when she came in.

"You can go if you wants to," said Ellen.

Susie hesitated, looking from one woman to the other. A plunge into the unknown world dismayed her. Valiantly she compromised.

"If you please, ma'am, I'd like it ever so if I might have tea once again in the forest with you."

"We can manage more than that. I'm asking you to stay with me for a few days at Puddenhurst. If you should feel—homesick, my car would whisk you back here in less than half an hour. I'm going away soon—far, far away—and as you are my god-child I should like to see more of you. What do you say?"

Susie glanced at Ellen. But Ellen looked down her long nose at the rough hands clasped together upon her ample lap.

Susie turned to inspect her godmother. To her surprise that wonderful lady was looking down her lovely nose, staring, apparently, at the rings upon her fingers. Possibly she had bells on her toes, too. The rings challenged Susie's attention; they sparkled invitingly.

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"You ain't got a little girl of your very own, ma'am?"

"No," said Miss Clem. "And that is why I want to borrow you for a few days."

"Yes, ma'am; and, reelly an' truly, if I do pay you a visit I can run over home when I wants to?"

"That is understood."

"Rightie O! I'll come on appro, ma'am."

Miss Clem started. She recalled the day when she had rehearsed "on appro." It was strange to hear the familiar phrase in Susie's mouth, but she guessed that Ellen, living in a remote rural district, had to send for many things "on appro."

Miss Clem laughed, as she replied:

"But I am to be 'on appro,' not you."

"If you please, ma'am."

5

Within the week Susie entered a new and wonderful world. Upon the first afternoon, the silver-grey car whirled her into Westhampton, into a paradise of shops. Miss Clem was too much of an artist to overdress the child. Only the simplest things were bought. Susie said naively:

"I'd like Cissy Mowland to see me."

"She won't," said Miss Clem firmly. "We, you and I, are playing a sort of game—dressing-up is part of it. I'm just pretending that you're mine. I might have had a little girl exactly like you."

"Yes, ma'am. Do you think I favour father or mother?"

Miss Clem stared at a dark head and dark eyes.

"I think you are like your father," she said slowly.

"Well, I never! Father's hair was ginger before it turned grey."

"Was it?"

"Do you remember father well?"

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"Yes."

Miss Clem became exasperatingly silent. But Susie was accustomed to silence. She stared at this lady of infinite surprises, wondering at her luck in finding such a godmother.

"It's a fairy tale," she said presently.

"What is?"

"My having you for a godmother, but I'm not a bit like Cinderella."

"You have small feet."

"I'm always growing out o' my shoes. That worrits father. It means less 'baccy."

"And less beer?"

"Father ain't a oner for beer. Mother's ever so proud o' that. Shall I tell you a secret?"

"Do."

"Father's never the worse for liquor, never, never!"

She prattled on, artlessly revealing the characters of the two persons to whom she had been entrusted.

The sunny hours flitted by. Most of them were spent in the forest. Each day there was the excitement of unpacking a luncheon basket and a tea basket. Susie, much to Miss Clem's astonishment, displayed Arcadian lore; she knew the names of birds and flowers; she repeated, quaint little echo, the slow phrases that had dropped from the lips of Tom Breed, luminously revealing his powers of observation. Miss Clem was urban. She had known many men and many cities. In her heart, probably, she regarded her father's gardener as a clod-hopper. Now, his simple wisdom, filtering through the mind of a child, amazed her. She realized that Susie was happy and contented, that she had the bloom and delicacy of texture of some wild flower.

Upon the third day an incident happened. The strangely assorted pair were alone upon the spacious moors that rise above the oaks planted by William of Orange. They had passed a gipsy encampment.

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"The gippers are nice people," said Susie.

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

"When I was your age, I was told that they stole children."

Susie opened wide her eyes.

"Why should they? They have such heaps of their own. They do steal chickens, but not from folks who are good to 'em. They never steal from us. And they tell fortunes. Old mother Stanley told mine."

"What did she tell you?"

"O' course, I'm a forest child, the child o' sun and air," insensibly she adopted the sing-song patter, "the happy-go-lucky child."

"Anything else?"

"A live-and-die-in-the-forest child. Maybe I'll marry one o' the keepers. That would be ever so nice, wouldn't it? And I mean to have lots of children, because they're the gifts of the Lord."

"Who says so?"

"Father."

At this point the incident occurred. A cuckoo called.

"Poor cuckoo," said Susie.

"Why 'poor'?"

Susie explained volubly, quoting Tom Breed.

"They was late this year—see?" Miss Clem nodded. "And the hedge-sparrows nested early. There was fledgelings in a nest in our hedge afore we heard the first cuckoo. I 'specks there won't be so many cuckoos next year, because their eggs won't hatch out. I used to hate the cuckoos, but father said I ought to be sorry for 'em."

"Tell me," cooed Miss Clem. She wondered what Tom Breed would have to say about cuckoos.

"It's awful, ain't it? that they has no nesties of their own. And they never knows the fun o' fending for their little 'uns."

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"Is it fun?"

"'Course it is. Mr. Fox has his good times when he's hunting for Mrs. Vixen an' the cubs. Mother Owl helps Father Owl to hunt for the second brood. For why? Because the first brood keeps the second brood cosy and warm, so Mother Owl can gad about a bit."

"You are teaching me more than I'm teaching you, Susie. But what do you think of cuckoos? Do you think it perfectly hateful of a bird to lay its egg in another nest and to leave its little one to hedge-sparrows?"

Susie considered this with her head on one side.

"Father says it takes a mort o' people to make a world, and I 'specks it's just so wi' birds. If there was no cuckoos we'd miss 'em, wouldn't we? I counted ten t'other day; yes, I did. God wouldn't ha' made cuckoos if they wasn't wanted."

"That's a very comforting thought," said Miss Clem.

6

Upon the fourth day, in the morning, Susie was sent back to the cottage to spend a couple of hours with Ellen. She described faithfully her adventures. Ellen listened with a face like a graven image. Each word fell like molten lead upon her heart. It was so obvious that the child had been captivated.

"She's just lovely," she concluded.

The silver-grey motor came for Susie punctually and whirled her back into fairyland. Ellen had work to do, but she didn't do it. She sat in the kitchen, in a hard, straight-backed chair, and pondered many things in her heart. In a dumb, miserable fashion she had always divined that this bitter hour would come. She suffered the more poignantly because she guessed that Miss Clem was suffering, too. Before Tom Breed came in at tea-time, she wrote a letter and

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posted it herself. To Tom she said nothing beyond stating the simple fact that Susie had paid her a visit. Tom ate and smoked in silence. But the fingers which filled his pipe were not quite steady. Before he went to dig in his own garden, he said a word :

"My back be broad enough, old 'ooman, to carry your troubles."

Ellen replied in a hard voice :

"I knows that. But God A'mighty, seemin'ly, stiffened your back, Tom, an' put less starch into mine."

Ellen rose betimes next morning, and put her small parlour into order. She was expecting a visitor, and the visitor came. Ellen dusted an immaculate chair upon which Miss Clem sat down with little of her accustomed grace.

"You offer to give up Susie ? "

"Yes."

"For her sake, perhaps for my sake, not for your own ? "

"For her sake, Miss Clem."

"Have you talked this over with Tom ? "

"Not yet. He knows. We both knows what you can give the child. Speakin' plainly, wi'out offence, Susie is a love child. She needs love."

"But you have given her that. Perhaps I wanted to make sure. Perhaps," she hesitated, "perhaps, Ellen, I have made sure that you have done what I left undone. Susie is the happiest little creature I have ever met."

"Ah-h-h ! that hurts."

"Hurts ? Why should it hurt ? "

"Well, just suppose that I'm not what you take me to be. If I told you that I'd been hopin' an' prayin'—yes, prayin'—that Susie would get home-sick, that of her own accord she'd come back to me an' tell me so. . . . But 'tisin't Nature, not child's nature. She reaches out, bless 'er ! to you—her own

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mother. I knowed it must be so—so did Tom, although never a word from him. I ain't a whiner, never held wi' that, and I ain't a fool. Susie can't help bein' happy wi' you. When I hoped for the contrairy I was up against God A'mighty. Maybe I wrote that letter because I knew what sort o' miserable sinner I be."

"And what do you think I thought when I read it?"

"I dunno, Miss Clem. You ain't changed much. You was allers the loving sort, but naughty. Naughtiness couldn't be spanked out o' you. I reckons you've wanted Susie time an' time again as you've wanted nothing else."

Miss Clem shivered.

"We can't get away from it, can we? She's yours. We're rough folk, me an' Tom, and set in our ways. When I holds up my finger Susie don't allers come to me. But she flew to you at the first sign. It was a sign to me."

"Do you blame me for trying to make her happy?"

Ellen hesitated and compressed her lips.

"Do you, Ellen?"

"I dunno."

"Your letter has overwhelmed me. I read between every line of it a spirit of self-sacrifice of which I am incapable. I feel very small, Ellen, as I sit here in the presence of a noble woman."

"We has to consider—Susie."

"Yes. Shall we try to do so?" Ellen nodded. "If I should take her, what will happen? She will have to live my life. I am dependent on my profession. I should not be ashamed of telling the world that she is mine. I could give her much that perhaps you over-value. But—happiness? Is that to be found in my restless world? If she stays with you, if—if I drift out of her life just as I drifted into it, she will grow up in this quiet peaceful place, find

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satisfaction in simple, costless things. . . . I have never been satisfied, Ellen, never. I want, I—I can't do without the roar of the crowd, excitements, change. These do not make for happiness, and you yourself know it."

She stood up. Ellen rose, too. They looked at each other honestly, conscious that the child stood between them, stretching out eager hands to each.

Miss Clem spoke again.

"I am a creature of impulse, Ellen, but I have learned to distrust my impulses. I shall do nothing rashly. Let us wait a little longer. Shall we?"

Ellen bowed her head resignedly.

7

When Tom came in, she told him what had passed without comment. He perceived that she had accepted the situation, and he, for his part, accepted it as resignedly.

After tea he went out. Ellen was very "short" with a neighbour who dropped in and retired hastily, not according to plan. The neighbour told her eldest daughter that Mrs. Breed was "showin' her age, turnin' sourish, an' keepin' 'erself to 'erself."

Ellen, as soon as the neighbour had departed, went back to the parlour. In it were some precious souvenirs of Susie. Half a dozen photographs, her first doll, her first shoe, a front tooth, a few picture-books, well-thumbed, and a sampler worked by Susie and expensively framed.

These articles—and many more—were removed by Ellen and carried to the tiny attic where Susie slept.

"You can hide here," said Ellen to herself.

It is significant that after these labours, she cooked for Tom a supper which was slightly better than usual. But after supper, when Tom reached for the Family Bible, she protested grimly :

The Lovely Lady

"Read the chapter to yourself, Tom."

She went back into the kitchen, leaving Tom to his own reflections. He stared at the Bible, still in his hand, and replaced it on the shelf. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he opened it at the page which recorded his marriage with Ellen. Under that entry was another recording the birth of Susie. Tom shook his head. Had he acquired the habit of speaking aloud his thoughts, he might have said:

"I don't hold wi' lies. They comes homealong to roost."

Nevertheless, having done an honest day's work, he slept well and soundly. Ellen lay beside him wide-awake, unable to sleep because she was appalled by the sense of her own wickedness. She had refused to listen to the Word of God, and, deliberately, she had laid her down without repeating her prayers. She had forsaken God because, so it seemed to her, God had forsaken a faithless old woman. To her simple mind a sacrifice was demanded which she was incapable of making. Obviously, the great patriarch, Abraham, had been fashioned out of stouter stuff. Ellen Breed envisaged herself as "shoddy." And, all her life, she had regarded shoddy with disdain.

She was moving about the kitchen, when Tom woke up. With an effort which the Recording Angel may have appreciated, she greeted her husband with a smile when he sat down to his sizzling rasher.

"I must purtend," she thought. "I must go on purtendin' for the rest o' my onnatural life."

Tom was back at work at eight to the minute. Ellen washed up. In her goings to and fro across the kitchen, she found herself furtively shying, so to speak, at the Bible. Finally, she covered it with a clean duster, and then sat down to compute the years which, according to the psalmist's span, stretched drear and drab before her tearless eyes . . .

Presently she heard the click of a latch and light footsteps. They must, she swiftly decided, belong to

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Cissie Mowland. The child, as usual, was coming to borrow something, a loaf of bread, a pat of butter, or a few potatoes.

"She shan't have nothink," thought Ellen. "Drat the child, and her mother, too. Drat everybody!"

She hardened her ears against the familiar tap on the door. To her surprise it burst open.

Susie stood upon the threshold.

But—what a Susie!

Not the spick and span visitor of the day before yesterday, but a Susie in her old clothes, covered with dust and sobbing piteously.

"My lamb!" ejaculated Ellen.

She snatched the child to her arms and crooned over her.

"I runned away," sobbed Susie. "I runned away."

"You runned away? For why?"

"'Cause I was homesick."

The full explanation was not forthcoming at once. Bit by bit it leaked from the quivering lips. The fairy godmother had changed into a cross, unkind witch. The pupils of Susie's eyes dilated as she became more articulate.

"I never wants to leave home no more," she declared; "I wouldn't stay with *her* again, not if it were never so. She was cross last night an' cross this morning, so—so I runned away. If she comes to fetch me you won't lemme go back, will you, mother?"

Ellen replied in a somewhat odd voice:

"She won't come back, Susie."

Tom Breed passed final judgment on the episode. When Ellen told him why Susie had run home, he was filled with indignation. To his utter confounding Ellen laughed.

"Miss Clem, as you knows, was nearly as dear to me, Tom, as our little Susie. And she never was one to do things by 'alves, neither. She's a play-

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actress, she is, and she earns her hundred pound a week, as I've often told you."

"Play-actress?" echoed Tom Breed. "You means——?"

"Never you mind what I means. Less said about that the better."

Tom digested this for half a minute. Then he observed slowly:

"When you told me, Ellen, what Miss Clem earned, I felt a bit sore like, but now I understands. And I says this—and I sticks to it—if 'twas play-actin' as sent Susie back to us, Miss Clem ain't overpaid."

THE CALL OF THE FOREST

I

QUEEN'S JALLAND shares with Ockley the distinction—if you can call it that—of ignoring post-war progress and post-war activities. Grass grows in its only street, where cows and geese graze undisturbed by fears of motors and motor-bicycles. There is no high road to it from Puddenhurst, the hub of the Forest of Ys, unless you go round by Lingwood. Some of the gaffers have never ventured even as far as Westhampton or Melchester. It is beloved by gipsies and pedlars.

Most of the villagers own tiny freeholds, which accounts perhaps for the condition of the cottages. The squire of Queen's Jalland is patron of the living, and the village takes its name from his family, but he cannot interfere with the freeholders, and is popular because he never attempts to do so.

Adam Mowland was one of these independents. His eldest son, William, had left Queen's Jalland three years before the war. And he had left it under a misapprehension of the laws of mine and thine. To this day there lingers in the forest a superstition that "finding is keeping." William Mowland had found a pheasant in the squire's woods, but he had not kept it. The fact that it had been transferred summarily from William's keeping to that of its owner rankled. The more thoughtless jeered at William. A carter, making a significant loop with his whip-thong, dangled it above William's head, in front of the Cat and Compasses. William understood that finding and not keeping might lead to the gallows. To save an unendurable situation he bolted,

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shipped as a roustabout at Westhampton, and sailed away for foreign parts. In due time a letter arrived from California. William informed his parents that he was "punching" cattle in the foothills of the Golden State. Of the punches he had received at the hands of Fortune he said nothing, which is greatly to his credit, because no rawer lad ever stepped into the foc's'le of a sailing ship. From time to time William wrote again, and it was plain to the parson, who read William's epistles to Adam and Elizabeth, that spelling and grammar had undergone a change for the better. Obviously, William was doing well, although—and here your true Forester peeps out—he had not stuck to cow-punching. Milk-ing those gentle animals may have been more in his line. Apparently, William was a "caslety man," which, in Forest patter, means a Jack of All Trades.

Now he was coming home.

With money in his pocket!

It was this astounding fact that kindled excitement in the Mowland family. The parson, however, pointed out that money was an indefinite article. It was difficult to believe that William had accumulated a fortune. He might land at Westhampton with a hundred pounds or a thousand. Beyond that limit the parson refused to soar.

William arrived.

He carried himself, and a small grip-sack, modestly. He greeted his parents and the many who were of kin to him without effusion. He might, indeed, have been absent ten days instead of ten years. He wore, it was remarked, good clothes un-English in cut; he spoke with a strong American accent, using strange expressions; he had acquired the swinging gait of a horseman; but he had preserved the secretiveness of the Forester.

Money was not mentioned.

Perhaps, according to the gaffers, the most confounding thing about William was his effrontery in

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admitting that he was a Pussyfoot. He dared to sit down in the bar of the Cat and Compasses after calling for—lemonade.

"Lemonade?" gasped the proprietor.

"Stone ginger," said William, "if you don't run to lemonade."

The proprietor couldn't conceive of anybody running to lemonade, and said so. William smiled. He could read consternation on the red faces stolidly staring at him. Everybody present had looked forward to "lashings" of ale to be paid for by William.

"Bone-dry, I am," declared the traveller.

"You looks it," said a gaffer.

This was personal but true. William had a desiccated look. There were no pleasing rotundities about him. Keen blue eyes seemed to blaze out of a thin brown face. Another gaffer, realizing that men of means must be treated with respect, said ingratiatingly:

"Now, Willum, I dandled 'ee, yes, I did, when you was not a span long. Rare tales you must have to tell, to be sure. What did 'ee do, me lad, in they furrin' parts?"

"I worked," said William incisively. "Yes, old son, all this time, when you've bin sleeping like a dormouse, I've bin working."

He smacked his lips. The gaffer sucked, aggressively, a tooth that needed attention. It was the first sign of aggressiveness.

A discussion followed upon work in general and pay in particular. Everybody present wanted to know what William had been paid. In Queen's Jalland certain catch-phrases pass from tankard to tankard. "A fair wage for a fair day's work" was one of these. But it means, really, to the Foresters getting as much as you can in return for doing as little as possible. They didn't get much before the war, and they did less after.

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"As a milker of cows," said William, "I can earn in California thirty pounds a month, but I have, when help is short, to milk twenty-five cows."

"Lard preserve us!"

"I believe He does," said William. "I've got that as a stone-cold fact in my pickle barrel. In this forest the Lord does preserve mossbacks who ain't got horse sense enough to preserve themselves. He don't use alcohol, neither, but beer."

In this lively vein the debate went on, till William, having slaked his thirst, and nobody else's, retired, leaving behind him a stunned audience.

"Willum," the proprietor said solemnly, "be daffy. I 'lows that I bain't a very notable traveller, but I 'tends market, goes thirt an' across, an' mixes wi' me fellow-men. I never heard such rampagious talk in all my barn days, an' I be sixty-one come Michaelmas. Willum must ha' made a large fortin to throw his tongue, as he do, so permiscuous."

The gaffers nodded portentously.

William, after leaving the Cat and Compasses, strolled towards the Mowland cottage. As he did so he regarded lovingly the familiar landscape, sensible that he had changed and nothing else. Till this moment he had hardly measured this tremendous change in himself. Not to his own mother would he have confessed that homesickness had brought him back to Queen's Jalland. He had been horribly seasick as he lay in his bunk in the foc's'le of the *Esmeralda*, when that ancient clipper struck blue water after leaving Westhampton. But mere physical convulsions were as nothing compared to the mental agony he had undergone. The mad longing to hurl himself into the Solent was almost irresistible. And again and again, in California, out on the sun-scorched ranges, in the dust and dirt of the corrals, the forest had appeared before his aching eyes as a mirage, a paradise seven thousand miles away, to which one day he would return. He had worked hard,

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saved money, lost it, made more, with this overwhelming homing instinct underlying and directing his energies.

At last he was at home.

The geese on the common hissed at him as he passed. The grazing ponies and donkeys moved slowly away. Blue reeks of smoke ascended in thin spirals from half a dozen thatched cottages. In front of one was a ship fashioned out of yew. In his youth William had regarded this as the greatest wonder in the world, a ship anchored for ever in the forest. In California he had thought sometimes that he would like to buy the Ship Cottage, as it was called, and end his days in it.

He paused now to stare at it. As he did so the door opened and a girl tripped out. She smiled encouragingly at William, and her features—what could be seen of them under a flapping sun-bonnet—struck William as familiar. Obviously she knew him, and he ought to know her. Yes, it must be little Ellen Mudge grown up. The jolly grin of a ten-year-old child widened the mouth of a young woman.

He held out his hand.

"I'm mighty glad to see you again, Ellen."

"You knowed me, Willum?"

"You bet!"

"I be goin' to fetch in cows."

William walked beside her. The Mudges were fairly prosperous, because forest rights went with Ship Cottage, rights of turbary and grazing. Ellen's father bought and sold ponies, never missed fairs or markets, and could carry a skinful of ale without showing it. Ellen's mother sold butter and eggs and bacon.

"Do you milk them?" asked William.

"'Course I does."

"What else do you do?"

Ellen replied cheerfully:

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"I helps father an' mother. I be busy as any bee from marnin' till night."

William glanced at her shrewdly. Her dark eyes sparkled, her small white teeth flashed between red lips generously modelled. The man remembered that there was a tincture of gipsy blood in Ellen's veins. Her grandmother had been one of the Romany folk, those genial vagabonds of Arcadia rarely lured out of caravans into cottages. Ellen's skin, too, had the dusky tint that suggests tents. Generally speaking, and in the opinion of workers, gipsy blood is a disability. But William knew that women in the forest work harder than men. The more primitive the man the more is expected of the woman. Indian braves hunt and fight, the squaws work. William said pensively:

"I've had to work morning, noon, *and* night."

"I reckons you be glad to be over home again."

"I am and I ain't."

To this Ellen made no reply. She looked mildly astonished. She knew that William Mowland had brought money to Queen's Jalland. It occurred to her feminine mind that he might have left something dearer than money in California. Presently she said slyly:

"Maybe, Willum, you've left wife an' childern back there."

"Dozens of 'em," William replied.

"Well, I never!"

"But not mine. I'm foot-loose, Ellen. I pulled up stakes back there. I can bide here if—if I've a mind to. That was my notion, kid, to settle down, to pick a wife from my own people."

Ellen received this statement incredulously. William might be thin and sun-baked, but he was a man.

"Tell me, now," she cooed, "you must ha' walked out wi' some o' they wild girls."

William laughed.

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"We don't walk out, Ellen, in California. We go automobilin'. And the girls ain't wild, but a dam sight tamer than you are. I know, because I've been engaged to three."

"Only three?"

"Peaches, too. I might have married, but not one of 'em would leave California, nary a one, my dear! That kerflummuxed me, because, someway, I wanted the worst kind to come home. Now I am home, and I feel—I feel"—he paused and finished viciously—"like a snowball in hell."

"Lard love 'ee, Willum!"

"Does He?" murmured William. "Do you know, kid, I sometimes think that the Lord, if there be a Lord, ain't overly kind to them as leaves home and kindred. I've hoed a stiff row. Maybe I've worked too hard. I can whip my weight in wild cats, but the muscles of my mind are dog-weary. Are those your cows?"

Four cows were placidly surveying Ellen. As she approached they flicked some flies from their flanks and turned their heads obediently in the direction of Ship Cottage.

"Nice cows, bain't they?" said Ellen.

William eyed critically their too small udders.

"How much milk do they give? And what is the percentage of butter you get from the milk?"

Ellen cocked an inquiring eyebrow.

"You don't know," he said, with his easy laugh. "I was a fool to ask such a question. I've bin home only twenty-four hours, and every time I open my mouth I give myself dead away."

"You can say anything you've a mind to—to me. We be proud of our cows an' pigs."

"You mess along all right?"

"Mess along?"

He grinned at her, not displeased that she resented a rude remark. In silence he followed the cows who swung too small udders. At the broken-down gate

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of the yard behind Ship Cottage the man said carelessly :

"So long ! "

2

He moved away, reflecting that he might have offered to milk the cows. Ellen probably would not have permitted this. He could see that he had offended her. But he divined also that she was interested in him. As he strolled home he coolly considered her as a possible wife. He might do worse ; he might do better. Let us not assume rashly that a Californian sun had sucked romance out of him. Sentiment, perhaps, is the stronger in new countries because it is suppressed. William, when indulging in introspection, believed that he had scrapped sentiment. A sentimentalist, for instance, would have gazed fondly at cows and pigs and barndoor fowls glaringly deficient in quality if they happened to belong to his own people.

He decided that Ellen was not lacking in quality. He described her to himself as "spry." He had called her "kid." Kids in California were often "'cute" and "cunning." He wondered whether Ellen had "walked out " with many young men. It was certain that she had. If she hadn't, the boys of Queen's Jalland must be singularly unenterprising.

Two days passed, including a Sunday. William went to evening church partly out of curiosity, partly because his mother expected him to do so. When he came out he muttered to himself :

"Same old mumbo-jumbo."

During the afternoon he had smoked many pipes upon the village green. And he saw Ellen, in her Sunday "costume," upon the arm of a "boy," who might be regarded as negligible from William's point of view. The ill-matched pair strolled down the road, but apparently did not wander into the forest.

William talked with his brothers, who listened to

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him pop-eyed with amazement. To them he appeared like a being from another planet, a sort of messenger from Mars. He pointed a derisive finger at the apple trees in the garden, at the ramshackle fences, at the dirty sties. Everything was N.G.—“no good.” But he held his tongue in the presence of his father and mother. When his brothers recovered from stupefaction one said significantly:

“If you be minded, Willum, to spend money——”

“More than money is wanted,” replied William.

He set to work vigorously on Monday morning, cleaning up. Nobody objected. Adam Mowland watched his son’s activities with pride. Towards tea-time they slackened a bit.

Adam said drawlingly:

“Willum, you be a rare worker. You’ve earned a big tea, you have, an’ mother ’ll see you gets it.”

“I must have a big wash first.”

“I don’t hold wi’ too much washin’,” said Adam. “Town ways bain’t our ways.”

William got a mash-tub, hauled it up narrow stairs to his bedroom, and scrubbed himself thoroughly. Then he put on clean clothes and went down to the kitchen, where a forest tea was laid out. By the luck of things, Lady Mary Jalland dropped in. She had heard of William’s return. She had seen him in church. And she had noted with dismay that he seemed unfamiliar with the beloved ritual. She was the elderly wife of the local magnate whose pheasant William had found and not kept. She belonged, too, to a type rapidly becoming extinct except in the remoter rural districts. She rejoiced exceedingly because there was no chapel in Queen’s Jalland. She told everybody that her lines lay in pleasant places. Lady Mary tapped at the cottage door and came in. Mrs. Mowland rose hastily and dropped a curtsy.

“This,” said Lady Mary graciously, “must be William. How do you do, William?”

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"I'm quite all right," said William cheerfully.

Her ladyship was entreated to sit down, and did so.

"I heard that you had come back," said Lady Mary. "I dare say you have remarked changes?"

She spoke interrogatively.

"Not one," said William. He added frankly, perfectly at his ease: "It bothers me considerable."

"Really? Why?"

"Looks like sleeping sickness, my lady. Out there on the Pacific Slope there's more change in a village in two weeks than you'd find here in ten years."

"Yes; we thank God that it is so, William."

"We had that good old hymn yestereve," said William, "'Abide With Me.' I don't say the parson chose it on my account."

"I'm quite sure he didn't."

"But it rattled me, set me thinking. And that line, 'Change and decay in all around I see——'"

"Yes?"

"I see no change, my lady, but decay! Gee!"

Lady Mary started. Mrs. Mowland murmured gently:

"Willum, bain't you a-forgettin' yourself?"

"No, no," interposed Lady Mary, "plain speech is—a—refreshing. You see decay, William?"

"I seem to see nothing else. And I smell—dry-rot."

Lady Mary looked astonished. She began to talk to the old people, asking questions, giving advice, playing delightfully the part of *châtelaine*. Then she drifted out, promising to come again. William laughed.

"I wonder you can stand for it."

Mrs. Mowland was puzzled. William went on cheerfully:

"I'd like to see her face if I told her what to do at Jalland Court. And God knows there's more left undone than done up there."

Leaves from Arcady

"Now, Willum, you have another cup o' tea."

Adam stared at his eldest born.

"'Tis good ale that Willum wants, not tea."

3

For several days William "cleaned up" round the Mowland cottage without assistance from his father or his brethren. As he worked he thought to himself: "I'll fix things and make the old folks comfortable, then I'll clear out."

Ellen, however, made him modify this intention.

He saw the girl every day; and he saw other girls. Ellen, he decided, was the pick of the Queen's Jalland basket. The other young women ogled William freely. Most of them had been in service. Some, during the war, had worked as land girls or in factories. William was asked pertly if he had done *his* bit. He told the fact simply. He had been turned down as unfit to serve twice, because at the time he was suffering from malaria, now out of his system. Malaria happened to be one of the "punches" which he had accepted philosophically. These would-be up-to-date young females slightly exasperated William. What they earned they spent upon themselves. They flaunted an urban air. Ellen had remained at home. She talked the dialect, long ago abandoned by William, which he heard and loved in his dreams. From her artless person radiated something hardly definable—a whiff of the forest, a fragrance of Arcadia. He could talk to her freely.

"I feel out of it," he admitted. "Games, now, this cricket and football. I'm not taking any. Ale-swilling! Drink, kid, was the curse of California. The women laid that curse. I spent all I made for three years on rot-gut whisky. Never again! Fag-smoking! Give me my old pipe."

"Forest ways, seemin'ly, bain't your ways?"

"They were my ways. What's wrong with me, anyhow?"

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But Ellen couldn't answer that question. She was wondering what was wrong with herself. Life had become less rosy. Till she talked with William she had been contented with her lot, faithful to the conviction that all was well with the Mudges. Now she looked at her cows and pigs with doubting glances. She no longer sang as she worked, because she was thinking of William.

He puzzled her. He talked almost like the quality. Ellen said to her mother :

"Willum thinks no more o' her ladyship than he do o' me an' you, mother."

"Ah-h-h!" replied Mrs. Mudge sagaciously. "'Tis all along o' Willum's money."

"We hasn't seen any of it," hazarded Ellen.

"That's why he's got it, dearie. I'll wager now that Willum has sacks o' gold hid away somewheres, an' may be dimonds."

Ellen walked out with William, but that meant nothing. He attempted no familiarities. She was conscious that he eyed her with disconcerting detachment. She wondered whether "they wild girls" in California had broken off their engagements because of his coldness. When he spoke, as he often did, of the Golden State she listened perfunctorily; but Desdemona was no more attentive to the Moor than Ellen to William when he spoke of his adventures and misadventures. Ultimately he grasped the fact that the girl was interested profoundly in himself, not in that distant country where all things were possible to young men not afraid of work. He said abruptly :

"Ain't you fed up with doing chores?"

He had to explain what he meant. Ellen shook her head.

"I be needed at home," she said decidedly.

"Have you ever thought of a home of your own, kid?"

"Ye-es."

William observed reflectively :

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"I've an eye peeled for what's O.K. in cattle, horses and men. There ain't many young men in Queen's Jalland who could make a decent home for you, Ellen. That boy you were with——"

"Oh, him!" Ellen tossed her head. "I can keep the likes o' him in his place. Saucy, he be, too."

William tried to recall what the adjective meant when applied by a maid to a man.

"Tried to kiss you, did he?"

"You saw 'un?"

"No. Well, I don't blame him, but——" He paused, glancing at her blushing cheeks.

"What was you a-goin' to say, Willum?"

"I'm ever so glad to think," he replied slowly, "that you don't hold your kisses too cheap. A kiss from you, by thunder, ought to be earned. We feel that way out West about the girls we respect."

"You respect me?" she whispered.

"More, perhaps, than you've any notion of," he replied.

With these words he crossed his Rubicon. He knew—and Ellen knew—that he was making love. But he walked beside her calmly, with his hands thrust into his pockets, looking ahead, as men walk in wild places. She had noticed this wary, alert expression. It distressed and excited her. It indicated vaguely danger, a hidden danger. She said shyly:

"Thank you, Willum. Why be you so different from the other boys?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I'm trying to find that out. There are two me's, Ellen. If the boy is father to the man, I'm a Mowland, but"—he laughed humorously—"the other me is a darned orphan."

She laughed with him.

"You'd better bide here till Motherin' Sunday comes along."

"I will, kid, if you'll do the mothering."

They had wandered on to the high moor above

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the village. Even in summer a cooling breeze sweeps deliciously across these uplands, bearing with it from the south-west a tang of the sea. No houses were in sight. They stood upon heather. The great woods of oak and beech and fir encompassed the moor. Forest ponies were moving slowly on the skyline, disturbed, possibly, by a passing red deer. The cattle were high up. William stood still and took off his cap, inhaling the pungent air. But Ellen saw that he was gazing westward. She had never heard Greeley's famous injunction: "Young man, go West!" But she knew that William had gone West. For the moment he was seven thousand miles away. She felt strangely forlorn and sad. If William did not bide——

She heard him speak, half to himself:

"It's out there."

"What is?"

"The land that made me what I am."

"You be forest barn an' bred."

"I know—I know."

He took her hand and pressed it gently.

"Do you think," he asked softly, "that you could leave the forest?"

She turned aside a piteous face. He was asking her to leave everything and everybody she knew, to go "out there." And if she did this great thing for love of him she would never come back. Why did he demand such a tremendous sacrifice? If he loved her, couldn't he bide with her in his country and hers? A fierce hatred of the unknown, far-off California possessed her. She beheld it as a monster stretching out tentacles. She had seen once a picture of an octopus, a devil fish, attacking a man. She had always wondered if the man, by some miracle, had escaped.

"Leave here?" she gasped.

"You couldn't," he said sharply. "I've felt what you feel. But I cut loose in a mad moment. If I'd

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been older, if I'd stopped to think, I should have stayed at home."

"But you wasn't needed over home as I be."

"That is true, too. Don't look so miserable, kid! I put the question to you because I was putting it to myself. I know what I can do out there. I don't know what I can do here. I'm figuring things up. See?"

She saw clearly. She knew that she was holding him against the lure of the land that had made a man of him. She hoped and prayed that he would bide with her. But she disdained wiles and guiles. And he, taught to think for others because he had been forced to think so hard for himself, remained passive. A kiss might have turned the scale.

It was not given.

4

June followed May, and the cuckoo's broken call ushered in haying-time. Every able-bodied man, and most of the women, were in the sweet-smelling meadows. William's brothers were working Lingwood way. William was invited to join them. Hay-making is not taken too seriously in the Forest of Ys. Those who own small freeholds get in their hay without extraneous assistance. The big farmers, with vast water-meadows, pay good wages to indifferent workers for some six weeks. A joyous carnival goes on, and gallons of small ale are drunk. William, however, "fixed things" about the homestead. Adam said to him:

"You can earn good money, Willum, if you've a mind to."

"Money," replied his eldest son, "cuts no ice with me here."

Adam and Elizabeth were unable to assimilate this astounding statement. They assumed that William must be rich beyond dreams of avarice. William, on his part, was in no mood to explain what baffled

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his own not inconsiderable powers of explanation. He could earn good money in California. But he had come home for a holiday. When the holiday was over money-making might engross his energies. Meanwhile he was working harder than anybody else in the family for nothing.

For nothing?

Was he working for love, or pride, or because the habit of hard work was ineradicable?

He couldn't say. But his actions were eloquent. And obviously he was spending good money upon timber, paint and straw. The thatching season is in August and September. Queen's Jalland was shaken to its centre because William took liberties with the calendar. The gaffers became inordinately thirsty when they beheld William "fixing up" the Mowland cottage. It will never be known what Ellen said to her father and mother, but facts speak for themselves. A new gate at Ship Cottage hit, so to speak, the "mossbacks" bang in the eye!

William, so the gossips affirmed, was so incredibly busy that he had no time to walk out with Ellen. And Ellen, oddly enough, as if she had caught a contagious disease, was overworking herself at Ship Cottage. Her cheeks lost their damask, her dark eyes no longer sparkled.

Before haying was over it became generally known that William was not going to bide. Fortified with ale and the conviction that California must be a Tom Tiddler's ground with gold to be picked up for the stooping, some of the younger men considered the adventure of going West with William. But he didn't encourage them.

"You bide here," he said, with his perplexing grin, "where you can keep the crows off the wheat. California can worry along without a leisure class. We haven't much use for—tramps."

Finally he told his parents that he was returning to the Golden State at the beginning of September.

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They accepted this sad news resignedly. Adam, after sucking at his pipe, said slowly :

"I 'lows you knows best, my son."

Two tears trickled down Elizabeth's wrinkled cheeks. She said nothing to William, but next day, meeting the parson in the village, she dropped a curtsy and half a dozen words :

"Our Willum, seemin'ly, can't bide wi' us."

"I am sorry," said the parson gravely.

He was an old friend, a kindly man, wise after a fashion that is not the fashion of this world. He had never sought preferment. He was distantly of kin to the squire, Lady Mary's husband. The living, not a rich one, had been offered to him when his health had broken down working in slums in Manchester. The forest had given him back a percentage of his former energies.

The parson, possibly, was the only person in Queen's Jalland who could understand why William couldn't bide with his own people. He alone knew, leaving out William himself, what California had done for a boy whom he had baptized. He had read William's letters; he had marked the subtle change in tone, apart from better spelling and improvement in grammar. Since William's arrival he had talked a little with him, quite alive to the fact that the young man kept out of his way. William, he guessed, would resent "jawing."

At the moment the parson said little to comfort Elizabeth. Indeed, she told Adam that "pa'son" didn't care. More than likely, a stickler for authority was secretly glad to be "quit" of a disturber of the peace. The thickest-headed gaffer in the village knew that William did disturb the peace. In his quiet, aloof, independent fashion "Willum rampaged."

Two days later the parson heard that William had presented his father with a pig, a young sow of unblemished lineage, bought in Melchester. An angel coming straight from Heaven to drink ale in the

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bar of the Cat and Compasses could hardly have caused greater excitement. The parson went to look at it. He found William at work. After praising the piglet the parson said genially:

"So you're off to California, with your banjo on your knee?"

William had never owned a banjo, but he appreciated the misquotation.

"That's about the size of it," he admitted.

"Before you weigh anchor, William, drop in at the vicarage and smoke a pipe with me. I should like to hear some information at first hand about this adopted country of yours."

Only a churl could have refused such an invitation. And the unsuspecting William yearned to talk about California to a sympathetic listener. His resolution may have needed bolstering.

"Thank you, sir. May I drop in this evening?"

At the hour named he appeared in the shabby, book-lined study where he had been prepared for confirmation. He filled his pipe with the parson's tobacco.

"Sail in, William! You hold in this village a master's certificate as a mariner amongst the reefs and shoals of speech. Tell an old friend what this lure of a new country is."

Thus encouraged, William did "sail in." He spoke at some length. The parson soon perceived that, in a sense, William was arguing with himself, defending himself, entrenching himself against all and sundry who might happen to differ from him. As a young man the parson had exercised powers of argument in the pulpit in much the same way. Boiled down, William's *apologia pro sua vita* amounted to this: in California every tub stood upon its own bottom. Efficiency reaped its reward, regardless of tradition, class and privilege. There were no restrictions of output. Progress was acclaimed as the one and only gospel.

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When William finished and was refilling his pipe, the parson congratulated him.

"You have learnt to talk well, William. California has sharpened your tongue and your wits. From a material point of view I can't gainsay your arguments."

"Was I arguing?"

"With yourself, surely?"

"Maybe," he admitted reluctantly. Then, with a slightly defiant air, he sat up in his easy chair and looked alertly into the parson's mild eyes. He was sharp enough to realize that a good listener intended to have his innings.

"You sail in, sir."

The parson made a deprecating gesture with his thin hands.

"I told your mother, William, that I was sorry you are leaving us, and I didn't say it out of politeness. I am grievously sorry."

"Why?"

"You are so badly needed here. How badly I can measure; you can't. Speaking as man to man, as worker to worker, I am not sure that your work of the past six weeks has not done more for Queen's Jalland than my work of thirty years. All of us look for results. We are all at heart Thomases. And a parson is only a person paid to preach what few try to practice. I try to open ears; you have opened eyes. Your gospel of work has achieved more than my gospel of words. Your father's cottage is an object lesson. That pig you gave him will breed a better understanding of pigs, and pigs count in the forest. Lady Mary told me that you saw no change here, nothing but decay. Am I betraying her confidence when I tell you that you have made her reconsider some very unsound conclusions. You smell the dry rot in our pretty cottages. You made her smell it. The leaven is working in high places and low. The Mudges are mending their fences. The

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youngsters are understudying you. No stranger could have done what you have done. They see at last what a forester can accomplish. The stream has risen higher than its source. I hoped that you would bide with us. I hoped that I should live to see the right changes in this village. But it is not to be. Good-bye, William, and God bless you!"

He rose and held out his hand.

William took it, mumbled something, and withdrew.

5

He passed down the vicarage drive, skirted the churchyard wall, and found himself close to Ship Cottage. It was late, past nine o'clock, and a star or two was twinkling in the pale sapphire sky. Ellen could see William, but he didn't see Ellen. He stood still, staring at the new gate. The parson's words buzzed in his ears like angry bees. He wanted to brush them away.

Ellen thought that he was coming in, hesitating, perhaps. She was tempted to call him by name. The girl thrilled with excitement because he was so near to her. After an eternity of suspense William moved away. She saw him cross the white road, step lightly on to the turf of the common, and thence into the shadows of the beeches.

"Willum!"

She dared not shout. He was too far off to hear the impassioned invocation. Nobody was in sight. Ellen, unable to bear her disappointment, flitted across the road, across the common, and into the forest which held William.

His quick ear heard the crackle of dry twigs beneath her feet. He was striding along, trying to escape from the parson's words. With every step his determination to leave the forest became stronger. And yet instinctively he was plunging deeper into it.

He turned and stood still.

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"You, Ellen!"

"Yes, Willum."

She stood abashed before him, realizing what she had done.

"You followed me?"

She nodded her head.

There was enough light to see her face. Her dark eyes accentuated the pallor of her cheeks. His voice softened.

"Are you ill, Ellen?"

She didn't answer the question. Possibly she never heard it. She had followed him with a definite purpose in her mind. Gossip said this and that. She wanted the truth from his own lips.

"You be goin' back?"

"Yes," he said, "I am."

"An' soon?"

"I mean to book my passage to-morrow."

She stood before him, so he fancied, like an accusing spirit, the wraith of the red-cheeked Ellen who had laughed her way into his heart. It flashed into his mind that she—*she* was in collusion with the parson, capable of going to him, of beseeching him to interfere. And, of course, she was like the other women, those "peaches," sun-ripened, sun-loving, who had wanted him to stay "over there." They were all cats, asking for cream and caresses, but refusing to stray from their own walks. She maddened him as she stood before him with love in her eyes. She would stick at nothing to keep him with her. But her love was not great enough to satisfy the supreme test. For his sake she refused to leave home and kindred.

"I'll go wi' you, Willum," she whispered.

"What do you say?"

"I can't bide here wi'out you. You wants me, don't you?"

He answered that question unmistakably. As they clung to each other William saw a light through the

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trees. It was the harvest moon rising in the east, but it silvered, with magic touch, the dark places in the forest and the darker places in his heart. The pure beams fell upon the face upturned to his. He recalled the moon-gilias of Southern California, never seen in the hot sunshine. They opened their delicate petals at night only. Would this gilia of the forest bear transplanting?

"You'll be kind to me, Willum? Over there I shan't have nobody but you."

His grip of her was reassuring.

"I bain't afeared no longer, Willie."

"You needn't be—*now*."

Something in his voice arrested her attention, one of those rare inflections that reveal one human heart to another. He spoke with conviction.

"I wanted this," he told her. "I wanted a wife who wanted me, as you want me. But now—now I see. You ain't going to California, Ellen; you ain't going to leave the forest. You and I, dear, will bide in the place where we were born."

The moon rose higher above the far horizon. Beyond the beech trees stretched the moor. Upon the edge of it gleamed the lights of the gipsy campfires. A faint fragrance of burning wood floated to the lovers on the breeze. A bell tinkled drowsily.

"Willie!"

"Yes, Ellen?"

"That was a cow-bell. Shall us have—cows?"

"I brought back from California nigh upon two thousand pounds. We shall have cows, and pigs, and horses, and—and——"

"And——?"

"*Kids*," he whispered.

The moon hid herself discreetly behind a cloud.

UNCLE

I

HABAKKUK MUCKLOW—known as “Uncle” to everybody in and about Nether-Applewhite—was a sportsman who loved the chase even better than he loved good ale. He was nearly sixty when the war broke out, but he harboured deer and ran with hounds afoot as of yore. In his happy case pleasure marched hand in hand with business. Strangers lost in the Forest of Ys, fearful of bogs, were likely to be speeded in the right direction by this jovial, clean-shaven man, whose smile was worth at least sixpence, and whose wise words might and did earn half a crown.

You may be sure that he never missed a meet at Christmastide. And he boasted a memory that never forgot a staunch horse or hound or the face of any follower who had tipped him. He could describe any famous run from find to finish, and knew every notable buck and fox who had “diddled” the hounds in previous seasons, not to mention those who had perished gloriously when their time came.

But he was at his best in the sanded parlour of the Sir John Barleycorn tavern, where, tankard in hand, he would hold forth to the gaffers of the village concerning the day’s sport and those who had taken part in it. Of the old-timers, the men and women born and bred in the Forest, he invariably spoke with respect, whether they tipped him handsomely or not. But new-comers, however lavish of money, provoked sharp criticism.

Uncle

"Who be the Bostocks," he would ask, "who be they? Not quality."

The Bostocks had bought a nice property just outside the Forest, and spent much money upon a rambling old house, money made somewhere in the north out of soap or jute or rubber. Bostock *père* had been given sound advice before he settled in a neighbourhood well known to be "cliquey" and "starchy." A good-natured cynic said to him: "They won't care how you made your money down there; if you engage a first-rate cook and buy the best wine." Thomas Bostock had not asked for this advice, but he took it. Nevertheless, he might have languished for some years as a comparative outsider, despite his many possessions, had not the most precious of these happened to be a charming daughter, who rode well to hounds. Bostock subscribed munificently to foxhounds and buckhounds, and within a couple of seasons was accepted as being "in" the Forest if not "of" it.

He was not yet accepted by Uncle.

An old gaffer answered Habakkuk Mucklow.

"They Bostocks be rich folk; they pays good wages, and I says——"

Uncle interrupted promptly:

"I don't care what you says, granfer; I want you to listen to what I says. Old Bostock be a carpet-bagger."

"Carpet-bagger? What be that?"

Uncle eyed him whimsically:

"I bain't surprised at your gert ignerunce, granfer. Likely as not you never heard tell o' Captain Columbus? Did 'ee now?"

"I dunno as I minds the name as belongin' to these parts."

"He discovered Ameriky, he did. And Captain were the first carpet-bagger, see?"

"No, I don't."

"You will, when I've larned 'ee. Captain

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Columbus were allers ready for a lark, same as I be. One marning he up and says to the King o' Spain——"

"Ah—h—h! I knows. Him as married Queen Victory's grandarter."

"You knows less than a tomtit. I be talkin' o' they ancient days afore you was born to ask silly questions. Captain up and says: 'I be sick to my stummick wi' this rampagious old world, and 'tis my intention to find a new 'un.' Wi' that, he packs his carpet bag and sails away till he comes to Ameriky, where he crowns hissself President o' the United States."

"Well, I never——!"

"Aye, I bain't going to teach you any more history, granfer, but you knows now what a carpet-bagger means, just a feller as settles in another country and thinks he owns it. That be old Bostock. I helped beat his covers one day, and, dang me, if he bain't a potter o' bunnies setting——!"

"His darter be a fine young 'ooman."

"Ah—h—h. I knows one young man o' your way o' thinking."

At this point Uncle buried his handsome nose in his tankard. Then he paid his reckoning and walked home. As he walked his thoughts dwelt persistently upon young Harry Culverley.

Next to Lionel Pomfret, the only son of Uncle's beloved landlord, came Harry Culverley in Habakkuk Mucklow's affections. The Culverleys were true Foresters, who scorned carpet-baggers. Harry's father had been Master of the Buckhounds; and Harry himself had been "blooded" to deer and fox before he was seven! Indeed, he knew the Forest almost as well as Uncle himself. Culverley lay fifteen miles away, beyond Brackenford, and nearly as far from the property recently bought by Thomas Bostock.

Uncle was well aware, of course, that money was

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scarce at Culverley. It had been scarce before the war. Two parlourmaids had replaced butler and footman when Master Harry became a Hussar. With the income tax at five shillings in the pound, one of the parlourmaids betook herself to the nearest munition works; and the loose boxes held just two hunters instead of half a dozen. This was tragedy to Uncle. And he had wit enough to realize that matters financial were likely to be worse instead of better.

At this moment Chloe Bostock appeared in the hunting-field. Now Uncle, as a harbourer of deer, had trained a sharp pair of eyes to observe trifles which ordinarily escape observation. Women take to hunting for many reasons. But, quite obviously, Chloe hunted because she loved it. The same could be said of Harry Culverley. Each came out to watch hounds at work and to stick to them when they hit the right line. No "coffee-housing," or what Uncle called "mumbudgetting," for them. Moreover, Chloe was a V.A.D. in a local hospital, and only able to hunt once a week. Harry Culverley, home on sick leave, hunted regularly.

Chloe Bostock captured Uncle unconditionally, bewitching him with horsemanship and pleasant, unaffected manners. It annoyed Uncle, however, to see that she was better mounted than Harry, but this annoyance vanished when the compensating thought suddenly came to him that Providence had sent the carpet-bagger to the Forest with the special design of rebuilding anew the ancient House of Culverley. From the moment when he overheard Harry telling Chloe the names of the more remarkable hounds, Uncle decided swiftly that here was an obvious match of heaven's own making.

But how to bring about so desirable a consummation puzzled him. Once before he had boldly dared to suggest a rich marriage to Master Harry. At Easter, when hard-riding swells come to the Forest to

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finish the season, Uncle had "marked down" a young lady said to be worth a "plum" as the future Mrs. Harry Culverley. She, too, rode dashingly, a true lover of the game. And Uncle, you may be sure, noticed quickly that her eyes lingered upon the Hussar. Alone with Harry, and knowing that he was regarded as a privileged character, he had said outright:

"I'd like to see 'ee Master of Hounds, Master Harry; yas, I would."

"All right, Uncle. You find the cash and I'll do the rest."

"Will 'ee?"

"Rather."

Uncle winked solemnly.

"That there Miss Judkins be worth a hundred thousand, so they tells me."

Harry laughed and shook his head. Uncle went on:

"I knows what you be thinkin' of—her long, sharp nose, which do, seemingly, come round carner afore her face, but, Lard love 'ee, you'd be lookin' at your hounds a week after marriage, not at her nose."

Harry went on laughing and shaking his head.

But Chloe's nose was neither long nor sharp. And Uncle noticed that Harry looked at it, when he might have been looking at hounds. Chloe's nose had a skyward tilt to it, an additional reason for following it.

By this time Uncle had divined that the Captain of Hussars was bashful with maids!

And his sick leave would soon be up.

If they could be left alone together——

But this was difficult of accomplishment. Lady Cynthia Culverley, Harry's mother, had not yet called upon Mrs. Bostock, partly because the Culverley car was jacked up in war time, and partly also because Lady Cynthia was slow to make new acquaintances.

Uncle

General Culverley happened, moreover, to be a Tory; Thomas Bostock was a Radical and a democrat. The young couple, in ordinary times, might have met at balls, on the golf links, or at the houses of common friends.

Fate ordained that they should never see each other except in the hunting-field.

Upon the Friday before Christmas Day the buckhounds met not far from Nether-Applewhite. Uncle watched the young couple.

Harry, as usual, engaged the hunt servants in talk. Chloe was surrounded by middle-aged and elderly men, who were more than eager to pay attention to a young lady whose father's cellar held '99 Clicquot and Napoleon brandy. Harry—so Uncle noted—glanced at Chloe from time to time out of the corner of an ardent eye. Presently he spoke genially to Uncle, and asked him how he did.

"I be hearty as never was, Master Harry. I hopes you bain't mendin' *too* quick, sir."

"Ten days more," said Harry.

Uncle reflected hopefully that much might be accomplished in ten days. Unhappily, man and maid were not likely to meet more than twice during that time, inasmuch as Chloe only hunted once a week. Uncle looked Harry straight in the face, as he observed critically:

"'Tis a rare bit o' 'orseflesh as Miss Bostock be ridin'?" He added slyly, as Harry nodded: "Be—utiful pair, I says, in my everyday way." Harry nodded again; Uncle sighed before he spoke the last word: "'Twould be a sad mishap, Master Harry, if so be as they found theirselves bogged."

"Awful," Harry admitted, as he tightened a girth.

Master and tufters jogged off to the enclosure, where a notable buck had been harboured. Harry, to Uncle's disgust, went with them. Chloe and her elderly cavaliers remained with the pack. Tufting, which precedes the regular hunting, presents rare

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opportunities for love-making, as Uncle was well aware. After the pack was laid on, if the scent happened to be good, undivided attention must be given to the chase. After the hunt man and maid would go different ways. Uncle shook his head as his active mind dwelt upon these things.

The tuft lasted well over an hour. Meanwhile Uncle had exchanged a few sentences with Miss Bostock. Seeing that her mare was inclined to be restive, he asked permission to adjust the curb-chain. Chloe smiled upon him sweetly.

"Scent 'll hold in the heather," Uncle informed her. "And 'tis a gert buck, miss. I knows 'un well. And, wi' this wind, he'll take the line he did las' year, when he diddled 'em so handsome in Winefields. Do 'ee know the country about Basleys', miss?"

"Not very well, Mr. Mucklow."

"Ah—h—h! 'Tis bad goin' as never was, ruts an' rabbit 'oles, and a narsty bit o' bog, too."

Chloe laughed.

"You cruel man! Are you trying to frighten me?"

"I knows you bain't one to be afeared, miss. But I makes bold to tell 'ee to foller a good man to-day. Major Hall, he knows the Forest better nor most."

"Major Hall knows it much too well," replied Chloe sharply.

Uncle grinned. He was expecting this affirmation. The gallant major, once a thruster, had begun to ride too canny to please a dashing horsewoman. Uncle muttered deprecatingly:

"Aye, that be so. And, as for Master, he can't abide to have ladies a-ridin' in his pocket."

"Of course, I know that," said Chloe.

Uncle allowed his eyes to wander in the direction of the elderly cavaliers.

"I dunno as any o' they 'ud do, miss."

Chloe laughed, touched by Uncle's obvious solici-

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tude, but quite unconscious of his objectives. Then the bolt fell.

"I must trust to luck and my mare," she said hopefully. "This will be my last day for six weeks."

Uncle stared at her, agape with consternation. She continued blithely :

"I'm taking on a job away from home, to relieve a friend. It's hard lines, because my horse is just in condition, but there it is. Duty first, Mr. Mucklow."

"Aye, miss, I be an upholder o' duty allers, but a bit o' pleasure be the sweeter, I says, atween jobs."

Chloe commented upon this, but Uncle was not listening. All his faculties were now concentrated upon making his "point," regardless of where the notable buck might elect to go. Intuition told him that the maid was ripe as the man for the marriage state. To bring them together, in spite of obstacles, fired his wits. Given the happy opportunity, each would rise adequately to it. He slapped his thigh, as he exclaimed :

"Dang me, if I bain't a fool ! "

"Oh, Mr. Mucklow——"

Uncle said solemnly :

"Yas; I'd forgotten Captain Culverley."

As the name fell from his lips, Chloe's cheeks displayed a deeper tinge of pink. Nobody but Uncle would have noticed it. Very thoughtfully he gazed at the landscape, as he continued :

"Captain, he be safe for 'ee to foller, a kind young gentleman, and a rare lover of a hound. Allers to right or left of 'en, he be, accordin' to wind. Ah—h—h ! I see Alferd a-comin' for the pack."

A whip galloped up. Hounds were uncoupled as the Master approached leisurely with his faithful tufters. Harry rode beside him. Uncle began to manœuvre for position. He intended to let Master Harry know that Miss Bostock was leaving home, but, alas, this good intention was frustrated by the

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other men, keen to learn from an eye witness what had happened to the buck. Harry spoke in a loud, clear voice which Uncle overheard, and so did Miss Bostock. The buck had been excellently tufted; he had broken cover a few minutes previously, and was last seen heading for Basleys'. Plenty of scent, and all conditions favourable for a gallop.

Seeing that quiet speech with Master Harry was unachievable, Uncle slipped across the heather to Miss Chloe.

"I heard," she said pleasantly. "It's Basleys'—ruts, rabbit-holes, and a nasty bit of bog."

"May the Lard presarve 'ee!"

"Amen to that, Mr. Mucklow."

"All the same, miss, do 'ee stick tight as wax to young Captain, and then, maybe, you'll ha' the hunt o' the season. I knows what I knows."

"And you don't tell all you know either. I'm much obliged to you."

Uncle's face appeared to be as innocent as that of Moses when he lay amongst the bulrushes. And yet, at the moment, he was contemplating treachery. A word from him might steer the maid into a bog from which, of course, a gallant Hussar would be constrained to rescue her. If hounds ran fast, as they were almost certain to do, two followers would be left behind. Abandoned by Diana, a kindlier goddess would take them in charge. Against this bristled the probability that a hard-riding young fellow, with eyes upon hounds and ruts, might, unwittingly, gallop on ahead, leaving the maid to be extricated by the elderly and middle-aged.

The Master trotted off with the pack; the field followed. Uncle took his own line, hoping to nick in later. He knew every stream and gutter where the buck would "soil"; and if hounds checked, as was inevitable, and if the buck did not go perfectly straight, as was likely, Habakkuk Mucklow might be in at the finish.

Uncle

Before the pack was laid on at the point where the buck left the enclosure, Harry and Chloe exchanged demure greetings, but pride prevented her from asking him to pilot her. Nor did she tell him that he would not meet her in the hunting-field again before he returned to France. Nevertheless, V.A.D. work presented a peg upon which Harry hung this remark :

"If they wing me, Miss Bostock, I should like to be nursed by you."

At that moment hounds hit the line with such a crash that further talk became impossible. The buck had fifteen minutes' start, a fact of which the leading hounds seemed to be well aware, for they raced over the heather at a pace much too hot to last. As the wind blew from the south-easterly quarter, Harry rode slightly to the left. Chloe followed at a discreet distance. As she rode she reflected comfortably that her pilot was in the cavalry, and not very likely to find himself in need of a nurse. But he had been wounded once. The thought of this obsessed her. She might never see his face again. On account of that she looked the harder at his straight back, as she touched her mare with the spur. An open stretch of heather invited her to gallop up abreast of Harry's bay. When he saw her he shouted :

"We're in for a good thing."

She glanced over her shoulder. The elderly and middle-aged were far astern. Hounds were together and running fast and mute. Basleys', with its terrors, lay just ahead. Chloe wondered whether solicitude for her safety would concern Captain Culverley. If he cared, surely he would say—something.

He did.

"Ware bog ! "

He picked his way across the treacherous ground, and she followed.

"Ware rabbit-holes and ruts ! "

The words were hardly out of his mouth when his

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horse pecked badly, recovered, and plunged into a second row of deep ruts. The bay's nose scraped the heather, but Harry refused to leave his conveyance. Chloe was much impressed. Her mare picked her way cleverly, till they came to better ground.

At Hockens' Water hounds checked for five minutes, and the stragglers came up. Harry, intent upon hound-work, said nothing to Chloe, somewhat to her mortification. Sorely was she tempted to tell him that this might be her last hunt that season. Was he too keen a sportsman? She held the question in abeyance. Others had told her that he was a keen soldier, but he hated to talk "shop."

A note from the Master's horn and they were off again, through an enclosure and on to the plain beyond, where the galloping was sound. Again and again Harry glanced behind him, with an unmistakable expression upon his face. He wanted her. And she wanted him! Nothing else mattered. He was pursuing a stout buck; she was pursuing a quarry quite as likely to escape. But she didn't try to overtake her Hussar, although she was better mounted and the mare straining at her bridle.

The line bore to the left. The buck seemed to disdain the woodlands. A man in a cart had viewed him heading for Ockley. Probably he would soil again where the Ockley road crossed the water. And here, sure enough, hounds checked for the second time, but not for long.

"Forrard! Forrard!"

"There he is," said Harry.

Chloe could just see the buck leisurely trotting up a distant slope. He carried himself gallantly, with no sign of fatigue or stress. A moment later he disappeared.

The pack raced into an enclosure and into fresh deer. Older and more reliable hounds hung back, not owning the fresh scent; young hounds had to be stopped—no easy matter in thick woods. The

Uncle

Master needed Harry's help; Chloe nibbled at a piece of cake. After an exasperating delay the true line was found, but the scent failed noticeably. And the followers were obliged to stick to the rides, relying upon ears instead of eyes to "locate" hounds. Harry hesitated, hearing nothing. The Master galloped down a ride to the right.

"Can you hear anything?" asked Harry of Chloe. She shook her head.

He laid before her two plans. Ever since the pack had been laid on, the buck had consistently moved up wind and to the left. A year ago he had run much the same line and tricked the field in Winefields. Probably he was repeating successful tactics. And in Winefields he would be sure to find fresh deer again.

Finally Harry decided to bear to the left, although the Master had chosen the right. They galloped on, pausing frequently to listen, but hearing nothing.

"They run confoundedly mute," said Harry testily.

"And so do you," thought Chloe.

Five minutes later they debouched upon a road.

"I see Habakkuk Mucklow," said Chloe.

"Good biz! Uncle will know where they are."

Uncle, a bit breathless from his exertions, did know. Hounds, according to this expert, were running right-handed. He had seen them and heard them.

"I hear 'un now," he added, with his hand to his ear.

"I'm hanged if I do," said Harry. "Are you quite sure, Uncle?"

"I be sartain sure that I knows where they be this instant minute, Master Harry. You has no time to lose, seemin'ly. Gallop down road a bit, and then across to Rinton toll-bar. Hounds 'll check at the water. Like as not you'll kill near Brackenford. Good luck to 'ee! I be fair beat, I be."

Leaves from Arcady

Harry handed him a shining half-crown before he cantered on down the road.

"We shall be all right," he told Chloe.

Uncle spat upon the half-crown before he transferred it to his breeches pocket. As he did so he smiled knowingly. Then he began to retrace his steps to Nether-Applewhite, where good ale awaited him.

Harry and Chloe rode on alone till they came to Rinton toll-bar. Travellers going and coming along the Cronmouth road had heard neither hounds nor horn. Harry was quite unable to dissemble his disappointment. Obviously they were hopelessly out of it, out of a clinking run, perhaps *the* run of the season. Chloe, with some knowledge of the male temperament, suggested sandwiches and a nip from the flask.

"Let's make the best of it," she suggested.

"But my leave is nearly up, Miss Bostock."

"Mine is up," she replied tranquilly.

"What——"

His surprise was complimentary. Chloe explained. Then she said demurely :

"I had better be moving home. Good-bye, Captain Culverley, and good luck ! "

"Do you know the way ? "

"Y—es."

"The short cut, I mean ? "

"N—n—o."

"I'll show you."

Once more they took to the woodlands, to Arcadia, which, even in winter, presents allurements. Side by side, in silence, they rode slowly down a lovely glade, treading softly upon deep moss. The sandwiches, so Chloe noticed, were forgotten, but a nip was taken from the flask. Harry said briskly :

"We'll not hurry on account of the gees."

Having said this, he had the grace to blush a little. Chloe patted her horse's neck. Harry essayed another flight of fancy.

Uncle

"If it hadn't been for me, you'd have followed the Master."

"Why talk about that? What is—is."

By this time they were nearing the point where they had left Uncle. And here, by the luck of things, they met a forest-keeper, who made a positively astounding declaration. Buck, and hounds, and a few followers had passed him within the hour, and the buck was running in exactly the opposite direction to that indicated by Uncle. He had kept on his self-appointed course to the left, disdaining Winefields, his former sanctuary. At first Harry refused to believe this, so great was his faith in Uncle. Corroborative detail, however, was forthcoming from the lips of another wayfarer.

Alone once more with Chloe, Harry cursed Uncle as heartily as the Lord Archbishop of Rheims cursed the little jackdaw. Chloe defended Mr. Mucklow. She said warmly :

"He wanted us to have a good run; he was ever so keen; and he told me to stick tight to you."

"Did he?"

"And he knew that this would be my last hunt for ever so long."

"Oh! He knew that, too!"

"He will be terribly upset when he finds out that he directed us wrong."

Harry said more cheerfully :

"Poor old Uncle! Yes, you are right. He wished us well. At the meet he spoke to me about you. Very complimentary he was, too."

"What ever did he say?"

"He seemed to have just discovered what I found out the first day I saw you."

"And what was that?"

"Your—beauty."

Being a plunger, Harry should have followed up this opening, but he didn't. It is possible that Chloe liked him the better because, obviously, he had not

Leaves from Arcady

practised the arts of the carpet knight. To make quite sure of this she said softly :

"I suppose paying compliments is part of the cavalry course?"

Harry laughed as he whispered confidentially :

"I'll tell you something. It's a secret between us. In our mess I'm dead lag of the compliment class. I wish I wasn't. I should like to turn myself loose here and now. The rummy thing is that I could tell your mare to her face just what I think of her, point by point, but I couldn't do that with you."

"Why not? It would amuse me to hear a good judge of a horse tell off myself, point by point, compliments barred."

Harry looked her over. He realized that he was challenged.

"All right," he said. "I'll have a go at it. If I take a bad toss and hurt myself——"

"It will be my duty to nurse you," she added.

"Very good bone," he began.

"But not quite the right blood," she said gravely.

Poor Harry flushed crimson. He had heard this cruel criticism from his father and others. Chloe laughed reassuringly :

"I put that in unkindly, Captain Culverley. I overheard Major Hall speak of me as a nice little filly, but rather hairy at the heel. As a matter of fact, I am proud of the fact that my grandfather rose from the ranks."

"I should like to punch old Hall's head," said Harry.

"Go on! With my points, I mean. I promise not to interrupt again."

"You carry your head like a blood 'un; splendid feet and fetlocks; just the right shoulder, not too long in the back, well ribbed up, sound from tip to toe, and a grand mover. There you are!"

"Thanks."

"Quiet in single harness, I take it?"

Uncle

Chloe exhibited slight confusion. Harry continued :

"Bidding ought to be brisk when you come up." As she remained silent, he leant nearer to her, whispering : "I say, has there been much bidding?"

She answered almost inaudibly :

"Not from the right bidders."

Harry had never craned at a stiff fence. As a rule he leapt first and looked afterwards.

"Am I the right sort of bidder?" he asked.

Chloe might have temporized; in pre-war times, doubtless, she would have played her fish a little longer; but his eyes looked into hers with a tenderness and sincerity which exacted as much from her.

"Yes," she answered.

2

Meanwhile, Uncle, contrary to custom, was slowly walking back to Nether-Applewhite. As a rule, knowing everybody, he asked (and got) a "lift" home, after he had cooled himself down in some convenient tavern. More, he deliberately chose the longer route, which happened to pass the property belonging to Mr. Bostock. It was likely, therefore, that Miss Chloe would overtake him on the road, and the thought of this so enlivened Uncle that he sang snatches of song as he plodded along the muddy ways, frequently pausing to look back and listen.

Presently, he reached a spot where roads branched, and here he sat down in the lee of the hedge to smoke a contemplative pipe.

As he smoked, his sharp ears caught the sound of voices. Uncle peered over the hedge, and beheld Harry and Chloe approaching. They rode upon the soft turf which bordered the highway.

Uncle bobbed down behind the hedge, and put his horny hand over the bowl of his pipe. A broad grin embellished his jovial countenance. He had noticed that Harry's arm encircled Chloe's waist!

Leaves from Arcady

At the branching roads the lovers parted. Uncle crawled along the fence and overheard the last words.

"I shall see your father to-morrow morning."

"I shall whisper something to him to-night."

They laughed, glanced about them, and kissed.

"Good night, you little witch!"

"Good night, Harry. Be sure to dream of me!"

"That's a sitter."

Chloe trotted on. Harry watched her till she was out of sight. Uncle ran swiftly along the fence, cut across a field, and five minutes later encountered Harry face to face. Harry reined up.

"Uncle, you silly old man, I've a bone to pick with you."

"Have 'ee, Master Harry?"

"You misdirected us, b' Jove—you! We lost hounds; never saw or heard 'em again."

"Well, I never!"

"And you were so positive that you knew where they were."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I be gettin' a very old man. And so tired, too, as never was. Misdirected 'ee? That be tarr'ble—tarr'ble."

He sighed deeply, looking so miserable that Harry's kind heart melted within him. Uncle added the last touch.

"I lost hounds, too, Master Harry."

"You look as if you'd lost your wife. Cheer up! Sometimes, old chap, wrong is right and right is wrong. Here's half a thick un for you."

Half a sovereign joined half a crown in Uncle's pocket. He thanked the donor becomingly, adding slyly:

"What be you doing, Master Harry, so far from Culverley?"

Harry reddened as he answered hastily:

"Miss Bostock was not sure of her road home. I went with her as far as the cross roads yonder."

"Ah—h—h! A be—utiful young lady, to my

Uncle

notion, a gert pleasure to serve she, I reckon. 'Tis too bad she was thrown out along o' my ignerunce. Be she much miffed wi' me, Master Harry?"

"Not she, Uncle. She stuck up for you stoutly. Mistakes will happen. Good night, and a Merry Christmas."

He cantered on.

It was late that evening when Uncle strode into his cottage, and Jane, his wife, received him sourly, knowing that he had declined a remunerative job of work to "traipse," as she termed it, after a lot of dirty dogs. Uncle handed her the half-crown.

"You take that, my girl. 'Tis money well earned."

He discreetly kept silence about the half-sovereign. Jane took the half-crown, saying dourly:

"Who gave it to 'ee?"

"Young Squire Culverley. Him and Miss Bostock lost hounds, and I happened along just then, and put 'un right."

Jane sniffed.

"*Right*——! It be wrong to hunt in war-time, I says."

Uncle smiled upon her.

"Such matters, old dear, be too high for 'ee. Me and the Dook o' Wellington carries the same mind about that. Huntin' be the backbone of Old England. And I'll tell 'ee summat else. Right be wrong sometimes, and wrong be right."

"What a tale!"

"Aye. There's a mort o' things for 'ee to learn, Jane. Now, you get supper, my girl, and thank the Lard that you be married to a very forcible, understanding man."

Jane sniffed again, remarking sharply:

"Was you in at the finish, Habakkuk?"

"Was I in?" repeated Uncle scornfully. "We had the run of our lives, old dear, and if 'ee don't believe me, you ax Miss Bostock."

SET A MAID TO CATCH A MAID

I

IN the apple-loft above the cow-shed Myrtle ought to have been sorting apples. Apples were a source of revenue to Eli Boggis, Myrtle's father, and apples, the year before, had failed altogether. This year, however, there had been a large crop, but the price in October was negligible. Eli consoled himself with the reflection that his apples, sound pippins, would keep with proper care till prices soared in the spring. Also, he had been lucky with his bees. All over the Forest of Ys bees had died quite unaccountably. For some reason incomprehensible to other bee-keepers, Eli's hives remained free from disease. Eli said modestly :

"Yes, my sonnies, I allers was lucky wi' bees."

On crawling into the loft, Myrtle's nostrils were titillated by the smell of ripe apples. She sat down to eat one leisurely.

As her small white teeth met in a juicy specimen, tears trickled down her cheeks. Myrtle let them trickle. Nobody could see her; nobody was likely to disturb her for an hour or two. She told herself that an apple and a cry would do her good.

Outside she could hear cheerful voices. Habakkuk Mucklow was thatching the cottage. Nobody but he could do it properly. The thatch was so cunningly fashioned, so out of the ordinary, that picture post-cards of the cottage were sold in Puddenhurst. More, the cottage when thatched by Habakkuk was such an advertisement of the thatcher's genius that Eli was of opinion that Uncle, as Habukkuk was called, ought

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

to do the job for nothing. Uncle, however, held other views.

At the midday meal Myrtle knew that something extra in the way of food and drink would be provided in Uncle's honour. Uncle had dropped a genial hint :

"I mind me when I was over to your cottage seven year ago come last Michaelmas we had some very notable old ale and a nice tasty ham wi' it."

Eli said generously :

"Old ale be hard to come by, but we'll crack a jar o' mead, Uncle. 'Tis comfortable to me to watch you a-tacklin' your tippie, a very warmin' sight, I do declare."

Myrtle would be expected to bring to the feast a cheerful countenance. She fully intended to do so, but Uncle, as will appear, helped her.

Habakkuk remembered Eli's pippins. Thatching is thirsty work, even when you use the best straw. And forester's eyes—that miss nothing—had seen Myrtle climbing up the ladder that led to the loft. Being a man of surprises, fond of a jest, he crept silently up the ladder some few minutes later, wondering whether a pretty maid would give a kiss and a pippin to an old fellow who had dandled the giver, as a baby, upon his knee. Uncle took a fatherly interest in all Queen's Jalland girls, because in his youth he had made love to their mothers and grandmothers.

As he crawled into the loft Myrtle heard him and looked up.

"Lard presarve us," exclaimed Uncle. "Whatever ails 'ee, my maid? I never seen a mournfuller face in all my barn days, drippin' wet, too."

Sensible, perhaps, of the sympathy in an old friend's voice, Myrtle burst into violent sobs.

"Dear, dear, dear!" said Uncle soothingly.

Myrtle was sitting upon a pile of dried fern (which preserves apples). Uncle sat beside her, pulling her head down upon his shoulder, and patting it. Experi-

Leaves from Arcady

ence had taught him what to say upon such occasions.

"You yowl yerself out," he suggested.

Myrtle did so.

Uncle may have accelerated the process by observing with conviction :

"If you could see and hear yourself, Myrtle, you'd never have another pleasant moment."

At once Myrtle's sobs became intermittent. Presently, she lifted her head :

"You won't tell mother?"

"No."

"You fair catched me, you did."

She slipped a brown hand into his. Uncle pressed it reassuringly as he murmured :

"I'll wager a crown I can lay finger on trouble. Understandin' I allers was. You has a good home; you be a well-favoured maid; an' I says to meself this very marning : the lil dear be husband high."

"Well, I never !"

"Unfortunately, ' husband high ' an' ' husband nigh ' bain't birds o' same feather. 'Tis enough to break the hearts o' you pore young maids that there be half a dozen petticoats i' parish to one pair o' trowsis. An' the young feller in that one pair o' trowsis has growed—as the saying is—too big for his pants. You own up, Myrtle, you was cryin' your lil eyes out—for why? 'Cause young Joe went charia-banging to Moscombe wi' Ada White las' Saturday?"

"Did he?"

"Didn't you know he did. I seen 'un. Ada was short-skirted a fair treat."

"I knowed Ada was after Joe. Charia-banging——!"

"Don't 'ee begin yowling agen. More'n likely Ada paid for the trip."

Myrtle looked happier; she cuddled closer to Uncle.

"You be wondersome, Uncle."

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

"I be old in wisdom o' women's ways, which be nearer our men's ways than is generally reckoned. I makes no doubt that a maid may want a man just so bad as a man may want a maid. I reckons you be daffy 'bout young Joe."

"He tole me not a fartnit gone he was daffy 'bout me."

A whimper escaped her. Uncle said sternly :

"Now, me girl, no more o' that, or—or I'll spank 'ee. I must be gettin' on wi' my thatching. Gi' me an apple, a Woodstock pippin if you has one, and a kiss."

He received both.

"I allows that I likes summat on account. Don't 'ee worry! Up there on roof, so nigh to heaven, wonnerful thoughts comes to me. If you wants young Joe, you shall have 'un."

"Uncle——!"

"What I says, I means. After dinner I may have a word o' counsel for 'ee. To my sartain knowledge there be five maids after young Joe, all a-throwin' their tongues. You run mute!"

He tapped her blushing cheek and vanished.

2

At dinner Uncle praised the mead, which is still made in remote parts of the forest. Like ale it gathers strength with age. Uncle, wise man, promised to finish the jar after five.

"'Tis sleepy tippie," he remarked, smacking his lips. "You has the trick o' the brew, Eli."

As he rose from the table, he began to fill his pipe.

"Afore I climbs on to roof, I'll smoke a pipe. I likes to smoke in God's fresh air. Myrtle, child, you come along wi' me an' keep me company."

"I did ought to help mother wash up."

Mrs. Boggis gave her daughter a push.

Leaves from Arcady

"You do as Uncle bids 'ee. Take 'un to bench under yew hedge. Uncle can larn 'ee more'n parson."

"That's an upliffin' truth," said Uncle.

Myrtle tripped beside him, as they walked to the end of the strip of garden. Generations of foresters had fertilized this land, reclaimed originally from the moor which encompasses Queen's Jalland, a hamlet still remote from the madding trippers. Eli's bees worked busily in purple heather. The plain, as it was called, sloped gently towards Nether-Apple-white, where Uncle lived. Probably it had not changed in character since the days of Rufus. Upon the "splashes" (small ponds) wild fowl found sanctuary till disturbed by the forest licensee; black game nested there within recent years; the peregrine falcon knew it well. It may be conjectured that the austerity of the plain, high up, wind and storm swept, affected the few persons who lived on it, alone with their simple avocations and thoughts. Uncle, coming from a more pastoral and prettier champaign, was well aware that Myrtle, as a true daughter of the moor, would have shed no tears before her parents. She would have hid sorrow as secretly as the moor hides the creatures that live on it.

Out of the corner of his eye he took stock of her. She had chestnut hair, thick and curly. Rebellious locks, too, able in their beauty to defy the wind and rain. For the rest, she might be called by Uncle's adjective—"well-favoured." An artist might have praised her mouth, not too small, but cut classically, and ripely red; the arch of the upper lip was cleanly defined, revealing white teeth. Her home-made clothes were brown, brown as her cheeks, brown as the moor in October. She had never been in service; she had no money to spend upon cheap finery.

Uncle, no mean connoisseur, approved of her. But he had to admit that Ada White flaunted wares more likely to catch the eye of young Joe, wares that

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

suggested chars-à-bancs and the picture palaces. Ada had worked in Westhampton during the war; Ada's people were genteelly well-to-do. Her father kept the village shop and post-office. To-day Ada was sharpening wits with all and sundry in the post-office.

Uncle didn't like Ada.

For at heart he was reactionary, like so many humble persons living in the remoter rural districts. At heart he sighed for the good old days when doles of half-crowns were common as blackberries, when beef and ale were set before those who kowtowed to authority, when taverns were hospitably open at all hours.

He liked young Joe, the son of an old friend. The boy had joined up before conscription. He had returned to the forest—"biggened," so Uncle put it. He worked diligently enough under his sire, who was a keeper in the service of the Crown. Probably he would step into the comfortable paternal slippers in due time. Nevertheless, young Joe had outgrown his pants. He "fancied" himself because he could pick and choose amongst the artless and artful maidens of Queen's Jalland.

In fine, Uncle, as he strolled towards the bench under the yew, realized that he had undertaken no easy job. No other man of his acquaintance would tackle with appetite so mixed a stew.

They sat down. October, fortunately, was not chill that year. Sunshine glorified the plain, and lingered in the little garden as though loath to leave it.

Uncle removed his pipe.

"You has the right coloured hair, Myrtle."

"For what, Uncle?"

"For high adventure, me girl. There's ginger in it. I reckons there's ginger in you. I counts on that. I allows that God A'mighty reveals Hissself in His works. He colours the beasts and birds ac-

Leaves from Arcady

cordin'. It takes an eye like mine to see a red deer harboured in bracken, or a squirrel lyin' snug against the bole of an oak. Yes; you has ginger in you, Myrtle, put there for its purpose. Now I axes you this: are you minded to do just as I tell 'ee?"

"Mother be right. You can larn me more'n parson."

"That I can. We be touchin' maidenly matters, Myrtle, the way of a maid wi' a maid. The way of a man wi' a maid be rampagious, for we men be so impatient. We slips up on that. I lay a crown that you let young Joe see too plainly how 'twas wi' you."

"I dunno!"

"But I do——! Howsomedever, 't isn't too late to pick up dropped stitches. I wants you to pop in, casual-like, on Ada White."

"Never!"

"Then I'll bid 'ee good-day," said Uncle, rising. Myrtle clutched him.

"Sit you down, Uncle. If I goes to that slithering slinky besom, I shall up an' tell her——"

"What I tells you to tell her," concluded Uncle solemnly.

Myrtle gasped, and then nodded. Uncle puffed at his ancient briar which was nearly out. When he spoke again he seemed to be diverging from the way of a maid with another maid. But conviction informed his voice:

"Ada White looks higher than young Joe."

"Do she?"

"She do. But facts sticks in her gizzard. Ada knows that there ain't Jacks for the Jills. Young Joe knows it too. Ada White 'd drop young Joe like an adder if so be as a likelier feller happened along."

"I won't hear a word agen Joe."

"Yes, you will. You take young Joe at my vallyation, not his. He don't think enough o' you 'cause he thinks too much of hisself. There you has it."

Myrtle assimilated this. Uncle continued:

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

"Ada be seven-an'-twenty past."

"More'n that."

"Quite likely. I mind me I did a fancy bit o' thatchin' for her granfer back in the 'nineties, and Ada's mother was afeard 'cause Ada was weaned the very night a screech-owl came a-hootin'. You be right. 'Twas in '92. And this be '21."

"Ada looks thirty when she ain't rouged up."

"Ah-h-h! She be husband-overripe, and gettin' desperate, pore soul! 'Tis a mortal sartainty that she takes young Joe at his own vallyation, same as you does. Now you goes to Ada——"

"Yes?"

"And you kisses her."

"Uncle——!"

"Then you congratulates her."

"On bein' thirty?"

"On gittin' young Joe."

"Mercy me——! She hasn't *got* him?"

"Ada thinks she's got him. If you don't do just as I tell 'ee, she will get him."

"I'll do anythink."

"You must go for the besom alone."

"Yes."

"You must be spry and chirpy as a furzechat."

"I'll do my best, Uncle."

"I can't tell 'ee eggzactly what to say, but there's ginger in your hair. You must let Ada think that she's got *your leavin's*."

Light began to illuminate Myrtle's brain cells. What physiologists speak of as "reticulation" took place. The airy gossamer threads spun themselves into a web ready to entangle Ada.

Set a maid to catch a maid!

"Uncle—you be marvelous."

She kissed him. Uncle accepted the sweet tribute with dignity. He continued:

"It'll be ticklish goin'. You has to make Ada understand that young Joe isn't good enough for 'ee."

Leaves from Arcady

"Oh, dear ! "

"Ada wants him 'cause you wants him. If you make her think you don't want him, he's yours 'cause 'tothers don't count. But that bain't all."

"'Tis quite enough," sighed Myrtle.

"You hark to me ! Ada will tell young Joe that he bain't good enough for 'ee."

"Yes; she will."

"Human natur bein' so contrairy, young Joe will bust hisself tryin' to make good wi' you. Got it? "

"I thinks I has it."

"Then I'll be on wi' my thatchin'."

3

Myrtle prepared herself for the hot encounter. Instinct warned her that such armour as was donned by Ada when she went "chariabanging " would have chinks in it. She hadn't a hat to compare with Ada's. She had no silk stockings.

But—her hair !

Ada "did " her hair according to the prevailing mode, with sundry additions not grown on the premises. The wind "did " Myrtle's hair with greater artistry. She decided not to wear a hat. Further reflection told her that it would be wiser to "go " for Ada in ordinary workaday kit. She recalled a phrase from young Joe which had pleased her immensely at the time :

"I'm a liar, Myrtie, if you ain't at your prettiest when you're milkin' cows."

Ada couldn't milk cows. Cows have to be milked. The man with a wife who can't milk cows has to bide at home, or hurry back from market when milking time comes.

Her brown eyes began to dance impishly. Finally, she took the field as she came out of her father's cow-yard, just about nine o'clock the next morning. As she scurried down the village street

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

the wind curled her hair, lent sparkle to her eyes, and flushed her brown cheeks. She entered the shop at the right moment. Ada was alone in it, not looking her best after a too hasty matutinal toilet.

"I want a furrin stamp," said Myrtle. "How nice you look, dear!"

Ada tore off a stamp. As she pushed it across the counter, Myrtle said gushingly:

"May I come round and give you a good kiss?"

Ada was so astonished that the sprightly Myrtle had hugged her before she could answer the question.

"I'm ever so glad, Ada. I suppose bein' glad, so to speak, for oneself makes a girl glad for others."

Ada said with frigidity:

"You means well, no doubt, but I don't know what you means."

"Oh, Ada——!"

"What do you mean, anyhow?"

"I wanted to be one o' the first to congratulate you, dear."

"Congratulate me?"

"Upon having Joe. Joe is such a nice young feller. You won't never be uneasy about him, not if it were never so."

Ada opened a rather large loose mouth, but Myrtle rattled on gaily:

"Course I knows dear Joe nearly as well as you knows him. We walked out together once. Did he tell you, dear?"

"I have eyes in my head," said Ada, still gasping.

"To think what might have been," continued Myrtle. "Reely an' truly, Ada, I b'lieve I'm as happy as you be about it. And I was so misa'ble."

"Miserable?"

"Yes, dear. You see when I found out how 'twas wi' Joe, an' when I felt as how I couldn't make 'im so happy as he deserves to be, why I cried my eyes out."

"Fiddle!" said Ada sharply, but, beneath a peek-

Leaves from Arcady

a-boo blouse a too ample bosom was heaving. Myrtle saw it heave.

"Maybe I'm soft," confessed Myrtle, "soft an' sloppy, but I did feel bad 'bout pore Joe. Yes, I did. And now you've fixed it up to marry him and take care of him——"

"Take care of him?"

Ada frowned.

"Yes, you knows that he bain't what I calls a pusher. He's forest born. Joe is Joe. A nice quiet young feller. Father says there bain't a better earth-stopper in the forest."

"Earth-stopper?"

"Yes; it's a shame, so father says, that the earth-stoppers don't get the tips they used to. Times be changed, seemin'ly, but Joe don't change. He'll do his duty and stop earths till Kingdom Come."

"Will he?"

"Course he will," said Myrtle soothingly.

Ada drew herself up.

"I would have you to know," she said majestically, "that you've been listening, as usual, to a lot of silly gossip. Because I went to Moscombe with Joe folks thinks, I dare say, that the banns will be up next Sunday. You've no call to congratulate me, and I'll thank you, Miss Boggis, to mind your own business."

"I begs your pardon," said Myrtle. "Is it three-pence for a furrin stamp, or tuppence-ha'penny?"

Ada said officially:

"Threepence."

Myrtle produced the coppers.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Bein', so to speak, so brim full o' my own business and—and happiness, I wanted to say something nice to 'ee."

Ada relaxed under this delicate massage. She smiled faintly:

"I accept your apology, but you took me aback. Joe is a nice young feller, but you ain't the only

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

person who thinks that when 'push' was handed out he was be'ind the door."

"I begs your pardon once again," said Myrtle humbly.

"Granted," said Ada. She went on in a cheerful tone. "You was speaking of *your* happiness——?"

"I'd love to tell 'ee, Ada."

"Do!"

"But, maybe I oughn't. Likely as not you'll laugh at me."

"Not me," affirmed Ada. "I'm not one to repeat what I hear, never was. Has your happiness anything to do with a furrin stamp?"

"Ada——! How did you guess?"

"Easy. For one thing I never saw such a change in a girl as I see in you. Day before yesterday you was mopy. This morning you look sweet. Am I to congratulate you?"

"Not quite yet, dear."

"Tell us all about it. I'd ask you to step into the parlour, but I have to be here."

"I dassn't mention names," said Myrtle.

"I understand."

"Would you be surprised if I told you I'd had a letter from America?"

Ada tried to remember whether she had seen a letter from America addressed to Miss Boggis. She was reasonably certain that no such letter could have escaped her alert eyes. But, as Myrtle knew, Ada's mother helped with the letters.

"I didn't see the letter," said Ada. "As for pore mother she never notices anything of importance."

"You never met him," murmured Myrtle, very bashfully. "He was tall and dark-complected——quite the gentleman. He come here when you was doing your bit in Westhampton. He stopped at the Crown in Puddenhurst."

"Stopped at the Crown in Puddenhurst——?"

Myrtle, salving a sensitive conscience with the

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reflection that tall, dark young gentlemen did stop at the Crown in Puddenhurst, went on even more bashfully :

"He—he joined up in America, joined up same as *your* Joe—I begs your pardon——"

"Go on."

"He joined up, same as young Joe, afore he had to."

"As a private, I presume?"

"As a horficer. He's rich."

"Rich?"

"But he made his money by—by push."

"Ah! That's the way to make it."

"I can't tell you, Ada, what he said to me."

"No, dear. There's things as can't be repeated even 'twixt the best of friends."

"He treated me, dear, as if I was the finest lady in the land. He never tried to make free wi' me. Well, Ada, I told meself that I was a gert silly. Was it likely, I axes you, that a reel gentleman would take up wi' the likes o' me?"

Ada, critically examining the flushed face and brilliant eyes, decided that stranger things had happened. But she observed cautiously :

"You was right to go slow."

"I thinks," whispered Myrtle, "that he was too much of a gentleman to say anythink at such a time. He was goin' back to France, goin' over the top. He went away. Who'd ha' thought that he would write to me?"

"Who, indeed?" echoed Ada. She added hastily : "No offence, Myrtie, but it all sounds like a fairy tale."

"That's what I'm tellin' meself at this instant minute. How much can I send for threepence?"

Ada said bitingly :

"You send all you've a mind to. If he's rich he won't object to paying excess charges at his end."

"I'd thought o' that," murmured Myrtle.

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

"Gracious! Here I be chatterin' wi' you, an' two hours' churning to be done afore noon. Can you make butter, Ada?"

"Not me."

"Pore Joe used to say that my butter was the best he ever tasted. By-bye, dear."

"Call again," said Ada, not too graciously.

4

Uncle, with his ripe experience of the sex, made no mistake when he affirmed that such a girl as Ada would turn up her nose at the "leavings" of one whom she regarded scornfully as "no class." Nor did she fail to notice that a letter addressed to Captain William P. Green, Esquire, c/o the Oceanic Harvesting Co., Buffalo, U.S., was likely to be charged later on as excess weight.

"I dassn't mention names," Ada repeated scornfully.

Temptation assailed her to open the letter before despatching it. To her credit, as a public servant, let it be recorded that she resisted this temptation. But she had a vision of a tall, dark-complected gentleman leading to the altar Myrtle Boggis arrayed in white satin! She told herself that she, Ada White, was assuredly a cut above earth-stoppers. Had she opened the letter, she would have found several sheets of blank note-paper. Had she consulted a Buffalo directory, she would have discovered that such a firm as the Oceanic Harvesting Company really existed. Myrtle, indeed, had found the firm's advertisement in an English magazine. The name, William P. Green, may be termed a flight of fancy.

Some forty-eight hours later Myrtle was milking when young Joe looked over the barn-yard gate, and, after a moment's hesitation, vaulted it. He wore the

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livery of a Crown keeper, which became him even better than khaki.

Myrtle happened to be stripping the last cow as young Joe approached. She said demurely :

"Good evening, stranger ! "

Young Joe replied politely :

"Good evening ! "

From the tone of his voice, she inferred rightly that Ada did not keep everything she heard to herself. Having her back to young Joe, Myrtle, with her face against the soft flank of the cow, indulged in a smile.

Young Joe said nothing. He waited, patiently enough, till Myrtle rose from her stool. As she did so, he too had a vision of a dark-complected gentleman leading a blushing bride to the altar.

"Any news ? " asked Myrtle demurely.

"Nothing worth repeatin'," replied young Joe.

"You have a new suit o' clothes on."

"Yes; I've got a sure-thing billet till I goes West."

Myrtle inferred, rightly again, that going West was in the speaker's thoughts. But going anywhere suggested, somehow—Moscombe.

"How's Moscombe ? " she asked.

"What price Buffalo Bill ? " sneered young Joe.

Myrtle giggled.

"Funny, isn't it ? "

"Very," replied Myrtle. "How did you know 'bout Buffalo Bill ? "

"Never you mind."

"But I do mind. 'Tain't your business, anyways."

"'Tis my business, if I make it so." Changing the subject abruptly, he went on :

"New thatch, eh ? "

"Yes. Uncle be a rare worker."

"With his jaw. Habakkuk Mucklow saw me and a lady friend going to Moscombe. He told you ? "

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

"Maybe. Who told you 'bout Buffalo Bill?"

"You can guess that."

"Yes, I can. Nice doin's, I do declare. If I made so bold as to write to Buckingham Pallis, your lady friend would be huntin' another job."

Young Joe scratched his head. In the heat of the moment he had betrayed himself and another. But he was in the temper not to care about that or anything else. During twenty-four wretched hours one thought only had obsessed his mind—he had lost a girl whom a more enterprising man had found. His voice quavered as he said meekly:

"You've finished milkin'. Time was, an' not so long ago neither, when I might have asked you to step on to plain afore supper. You be too grand now for earth-stoppers."

Myrtle murmured, half to herself:

"I'm not one to repeat what I hears; never was."

"Someway," young Joe continued mournfully, "I never did think of you as grand."

"I bain't grand."

"If you ain't grand, march along wi' me on to plain."

"I've half a mind to do it; but whatever would your lady friend say?"

"Damn my lady friend! Myrtie, I've been a fool." He relapsed into the Doric of childhood. "I knows it now 'tis too late. I be fair desperate wi' longin' for 'ee. I shall bide single all my days."

"Shush-h-h-h!"

"No, I won't. I be ready to cry i' the parish that I be the biggest fool on God's earth, same as you be the sweetest 'ooman. What did I see in that there Ada White?"

"A besom."

"She's swept me to hell. Come on to plain, Myrtie."

"Whatever for—now?"

"I axes this favour of 'ee, the last. The starch

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is out o' me, dearie. I want to bid 'ee good-bye afore night falls. I'll play the man, not the monkey. I'll wish 'ee luck an' happiness wherever you goes. I'll listen to what you cares to tell me about—*him*."

"You means that?" she whispered.

"S'elp me! Yes."

"Then I'll meet 'ee in ten minutes by stunted thorn, where—where we met afore."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

5

Young Joe had to wait by the stunted thorn. The gaffers could recall an oak that grew near the thorn. It had been struck by lightning and cut down. The thorn was dying slowly. Joe looked across the plain, drear in the fading light. The monotony of it troubled him. Listening intently for the fall of beloved feet, he could hear the inarticulate voices of the moor, the sighing of the south-west wind in the heather, the rustling of hidden creatures, the stirrings of life, however insignificant, beneath the vast placid bosom. Peace brooded there, but not for him, fool that he had been!

He had kissed her beneath this thorn. And because her lips had met his willingly he had held her cheap. She had cared—*then*.

He cursed himself and Ada White. She had beguiled him deliberately and turned him down. He had kissed her, and known as he kissed that kissing her was no pledge of true love.

Myrtle came to him through the gathering twilight swiftly. But she stood still a yard away.

"Joe——"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you *want* me to tell 'ee about—*him*?"

He answered quietly:

"If he be the right man for 'ee, I do."

Set a Maid to Catch a Maid

She gave him her hand. He hardly noticed that it trembled.

"He be right," she whispered. "From the first I knew that. When he went away from me my heart nearly broke. I—I felt that I would do anythink to get him back—*anythink*. I had to lie, Joe."

"Yes, dear."

"Perhaps, when he knows that I lied, 'cause he don't know yet, he may go back on me."

"Not he, Myrtie."

"I had to take him from another woman, an' isn't that a dirty trick, Joe?"

"'Tis all fair in true love, Myrtie."

"You be quite, quite sure?"

"Just so sure as I bain't sure o' my salvation."

"Then kiss me, Joe, for you be—*him*. I had to steal 'ee back from Ada. I told a fairy tale to her to get 'ee. Kiss me, Joe, kiss me hard and long, 'cause I be fair achin' for 'ee, same as you ache for me."

Night fell upon the plain.

SARAH

I

SAM and Sarah Beard lived in Nether-Applewhite, not far from Susan Yellam's cottage. But, really, Sam belonged to the Forest of Ys. His father had been huntsman to the F.F.H., and when he retired from active service he married again, much to the annoyance of two sons who lived with him. Sam went about saying :

"A man as marries twice don't deserve to lose his fust."

This, of course, was repeated to the step-mother, and the atmosphere of old Beard's cottage became sultry. Within a few months Sam and his brother George cut adrift. George, regarded as a dasher, sailed for Australia; Sam wandered no farther than Nether-Applewhite, where he was married to a Mucklow, a niece of Habakkuk Mucklow, the thatcher. Habakkuk approved of Sam as the son of a man who hunted hounds well. But, oddly enough, Sam had kept out of the pigskin, and preferred to work in and about the kennels. At Nether-Applewhite he did cheerfully whatever he could lay a hand to. Eventually he became water-bailiff to Sir Geoffrey Pomfret. Sarah, his wife, worked harder than Sam and made more money. Uncle—as Habakkuk Mucklow was called by all who knew him—affirmed that Sarah had "notions." Her cottage stood back from the high road. And it was hers, a small freehold. Sir Geoffrey, and his father before him, had tried to buy it, quite in vain. Sarah's superlative notion came to her about the time when motor-cars revived the ancient glories of the King's highway. At the

Sarah

end of her garden, close to the Melchester road, was a delectable arbour, a cool sanctuary, where tired travellers could sit and listen to the lullaby of the river as it sighed itself to sleep after roaring riotously over the weirs. Sarah hung up a sign.

"Teas."

Her teas advertised themselves. In the season she sold strawberries and raspberries of her own growing. A solid business was built up in "stone ginger." Sarah, moreover, was accepted by the trippers as a personality. She would stand outside her arbour, casting scornful eyes upon cyclists who rushed foolishly by without stopping. Inside the cottage, upon an ancient oak dresser, stood bits of Staffordshire, "salt" from a Melchester dealer. Sarah never lied about them. When indiscreet questions were asked she became deaf.

"Those as knows," she would observe tranquilly, "do tell me that they bain't bad. Staffordsheer, they says. *Old Staffordsheer*. My dear mother never did talk about 'un to me, leastways, not that I remember. An' gran'ma, seemin'ly, knowed less. Where they was in her time fair beats me. Locked up, I 'specks, 'cause they be vallyble, so squire says."

American visitors, passing from Melchester to Puddenhurst, bought, at a price, these family heirlooms.

Sarah dominated Sam, but she made him very comfortable. The couple had no children, which may account for the fact that Sam rarely strayed into the Pomfret Arms or the Sir John Barleycorn. Fretful babies do drive tired fathers to the alehouse.

In Nether-Applewhite it was agreed that the Beards were lucky. An extraordinary event which took place after the war confirmed this, and set every tongue wagging within a five-mile radius of Nether-Applewhite. George Beard died in Australia. A firm of London solicitors informed Sam that he had inherited five thousand pounds.

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2

The letter arrived after Sam had left home for the river. Sarah put it on the mantelshelf. When Sam came back for the midday meal he opened it.

Sarah, not he, was dazed by this stroke of fortune. Sam knew that George had gone to North-Western Australia as a prospector. George, being a dasher, had plunged into the wilderness, where, so he wrote, he might find pearls or diamonds or gold. That sounded alluring to Sam; but, according to George, the woods seemed to be full of blacks and the summer seas seething with snakes! However, somehow, somewhere, George had found copper, and a syndicate bought his claim. Then he had been killed by the blacks. Before he left South Australia he signed a will leaving what he possessed to his only brother.

"Us Beards be lucky," said Sam.

"Garge be dead," said Sarah dryly.

"I allers liked Garge," said Sam mournfully. "And I blames that 'ooman for this." He was alluding to his stepmother.

"Blame your father," said Sarah.

"Dad done his best," affirmed Sam solemnly. "But she would have him, same as you would have me, dearie."

"Five thousand pounds!" murmured Sarah. "'Tis a mort o' money. It—it sart o' scares me, yes, it do. What shall us do wi' it?"

"We be quality now, Sairy."

"Don't 'ee be a fool! I remains, money or no money, what God A'mighty made me, and you remains the same silly old dear you allers was. Our dinner be gittin' cold. I 'specks I must get out my black. You'd ought to wear crape on your sleeve, Sam. I be so mazed I dunno whether it be right sleeve or left sleeve."

"I be ready to wear crape on both sleeves, Sairy."

Sarah

After dinner, to Sam's disgust, his wife insisted upon washing up as usual, and reminded her husband tartly that Sir Geoffrey was paying fair wages for a fair day's work. Sam left the cottage feeling rather sore.

As he was strolling down the road on his way to the river, he saw Uncle striding ahead of him. Sam yelled out his name so loudly that Uncle turned in some astonishment. He objected to being yelled at. When Sam approached he said so with dignity.

"No need to yowl at me. I bain't deaf onless I wants to be."

"I begs your pardon," said Sam humbly. "But seein' as I merried your niece I thought as how you'd be pleased to hear that my brother Garge was dead."

"Well, I never! Garge Beard—dead!"

"An' I be come into his fortin—five thousand pound, so the l'yers tells me."

Uncle was profoundly impressed.

"Liars!" he repeated.

"I said l'yers—slissitors, they calls 'emselves. This be letter."

Uncle took the letter, but refused to read it in the village street. Sam and he walked together to the river, to a fishing hut which smelt evilly. As they walked Sam told himself that he could lean against Uncle's ripe understanding and his solid six feet of genial humanity.

Uncle put on his horn spectacles and read the letter.

"I 'lows it must be true," he declared. "Five thousand pound! Old as I be, it fair starts the sweat on me."

"No more sweatin'," said Sam positively.

"You means——?"

"I be thinking o' Sairy, a very notable 'ooman. She do get some o' her notions from you, Uncle."

"Most o' em," interpolated Uncle.

"An' she be a maker o' money."

Leaves from Arcady

"'Tis a notable gift," observed Uncle. "Spendin' be a gift too, as I tells my old Jane. I be ready to larn 'ee that, Sam."

Sam ignored this suggestion and went on :

"I says to you, Uncle, drat that there arbour ! It allers madded me to see your niece a-sellin' stone ginger to trippers. I don't hold wi' trippers."

"They has their uses," murmured Uncle.

"As for they drivers o' chariabangs, I'd—I'd gelatine 'em, if I had my way."

"Gelatine 'em, Sam?"

"Cut off their yeds, I would, as we done to they Frenchies after Waterloo."

"Ah-h-h ! You means gillatined—gillatined."

The water-bailiff remained unenlightened.

"'Twasn't their gills but their yeds as was cut off. Howsomedever, it comes to this, Uncle. For nigh on eight year Sairy has been misdemeanin' 'erself."

"You told her that?"

"I bain't such a fool. What she made wi' Staffordsheer ware just tickled me. Sairy done they trippers in a fair treat wi' that."

"'Twas my upliftin' thought," said Uncle proudly.

Sam nodded, as he continued :

"Me an' Sairy be quality now. I knows what I owes Sairy, an' be goin' to pay up. 'Tis a stiffish reckonin'. No more bottle-washin' for my old 'ooman ! No more muckin' about garden ! When I has my way wi' her, she'll be dressed up proper an' sit in her parlour from marning till nightfall."

Uncle's eyes twinkled.

"Sam, why not have Sairy stuffed and set up in a glass case?"

"I bain't jokin', Uncle."

"Nor be I. You means well, Sam, but Sairy be masterful, as I be. She's allers managed you. Now she'll manage this fortin o' yours. I'd like to think

Sarah

that you'd ha' the spendin' o' it, but I knows your old Sairy."

"None better, Uncle. But you bain't so understandin' about me. I axes you this: how can you know me, when I never knows myself?"

"That be a thirsty thought," remarked Uncle. He filled a pipe, staring pensively at Sam's face.

"What did Sairy say?"

"She be fair mazed."

"Ah-h-h! I bain't afeard o' my old Jane's tongue, but when she holds it I girds up my loins."

3

During the afternoon Sam stepped up to the vicarage to see the parson, Mr. Hamlin. Five thousand pounds had been too much for Sarah, but the parson, apparently, dealt with this vast sum as easily as he dealt with the bowling of the Players when he scored a century for the Gentlemen of England. His sage counsel was this: inasmuch as Sam and Sarah had been denied the privilege of giving sons to England during the war, and bearing in mind that Sam himself had been deemed unfit to serve, this was a great opportunity to buy War Bonds. The money would be soundly invested. And, after deducting income tax, it would bring in about two hundred a year—say four pounds a week for ever and ever. Sam listened attentively, but he shied at the income tax.

"I bain't a-goin' to pay no income tax."

"Yes, you will, like the squire. That's a proud thought, Sam."

Sam looked happier. It was exasperating to reflect that five thousand pounds had dwindled to four pounds a week; but later he said to Sarah:

"Wi' what I earns, old 'ooman, an' wi' tips, that makes nigh on to a pound a day."

"More'n that wi' what I earns."

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Sam pulled himself together for a superlative effort.

"You bain't a-goin' to work never no more."

"What?"

"You purtend to be deaf wi' your damned trippers, not wi' me. I says you be donè wi' work, done wi' it! I be set on buyin' you a black silk gown an' a gold chain to wear weekdays. No more tizzy-snatchin' wi' trippers! I sees you sittin' in parlour so proud that neighbours 'll tap twice afore you lets 'em in. Mind 'ee, I means this. If you rampages there'll be such a rumpus as never was. 'Tis my money—mine. I can throw it into river if I've a mind to."

This speech had a devastating effect on Sarah. She stared at Sam, beholding a new man. He positively bristled with excitement. Although she said nothing, her face softened. Sam's first thought had been for her.

"You means well," she faltered.

"I mind me," said Sam, noting with glee the faltering inflexion, "that when you up an' merried me I told 'ee that I had understandin' o' all animals excep' wives. I told 'ee you might do better. I warned 'ee I was no gert catch for a Mucklow. Well, you had your way. Now, Sairy, I means to ha' my way. Turn an' turn about be only fair."

Sarah sighed.

4

The amazing thing is that Sam did have his way with Sarah. After the money was paid over and invested in War Bonds, the sign "Teas" was taken down. Occasionally, passing trippers beheld Sarah sitting by herself in the arbour. She gazed at them pathetically, but they were not aware of this. The Staffordshire pottery disappeared. A young girl was hired by Sam to do rough work. In a sense Sarah was enthroned in her parlour, and neighbours who

Sarah

knocked once on the door were admitted quickly. Sarah entertained them handsomely. In return they prattled about their troubles to a woman who was supposed not to have any.

"You be like Queen Mary, not a thing to worrit over. Some folks has all the luck i' this world."

And then Sarah would sniff.

She worried about herself and about Sam. As a man of independent means his uplifted soul soared above work. He might have chucked his job—or been ignominiously turned out of it—had he not possessed the saving grace of liking it for its own sake. Sir Geoffrey Pomfret, possibly, knowing that Sam was honest, may have looked elsewhere when Sam was reported absent from the river. The magnate might have peeped into the Pomfret Arms on such occasions. If he had, he would have seen Sam and Uncle with a couple of tankards at their elbows.

One afternoon, after six, Sam said to Uncle :

"Sairy be waxin' peevish."

Uncle replied sententiously :

"'Tis Anna Dominy. We men, as we grows older, gets wiser. We mellers, like a sound pippin. Wimmenfolk grows sourish."

"Seems ongrateful," remarked Sam wistfully.

"'Tis female nature. We be satisfied wi' what we has; wimmenfolk mostly hanker after what they hasn't. I'll lay a crown you never axed squire to raise your wages. But Sairy! I never, in all my barn days, seen a 'ooman as could coax silver out o' the pockets o' trippers the way she done. She wanted summat as warn't hers. There you has it."

"I has it, Uncle, but I doesn't know what to do wi' it."

Uncle considered this. After a long pause he made a suggestion.

"I've a notion that Sairy be short o' work an' out o' condition."

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"She be done wi' work," growled Sam.

None the less, when he returned home, Sam betrayed anxiety.

"You be losin' flesh, old 'ooman."

"'Tis true."

"An' your nice fresh colour."

"Yes. I be gettin' along in years."

She relapsed into moody silence. Sam was much perturbed. Sarah and he claimed a century between them, but the Mucklows were long-lived, and, as a rule, kept their energies to the last. Finally he betook himself to Melchester, where he bought a large bottle of a tonic which the druggist assured him would put colour into a snowball. Sarah poured it down the sink. As the weeks passed she grew more and more listless. At meal time she hardly opened her mouth, except to put food into it, and very little of that. To Sam's consternation the good victuals which she had always prepared for him were carelessly cooked and served.

Uncle diagnosed the case unerringly :

"I told 'ee, Sam, that she be short o' work."

Sam agreed that things were desperate. At the end of another miserable week he said to Sarah :

"You be short o' work."

Sarah replied feebly :

"Why should I work? We bain't spendin' our pound a day. If I did get to work, me an' you 'ud look so redic'lous. Work! Why, I be turned into such a pore creature that I finds it a job to make the li'l maid work."

"Bother Garge's money," exclaimed Sam viciously.

Next day, Sunday, Sarah stayed away from church. Sam sought Uncle.

"Sairy," he said, "kep' away from church this marning. She be headin' for churchyard. If you be the man I takes you to be, 'tis time to off coat an' up sleeves."

Sarah

"I do my work, Sam, wi' my brains. Sairy be pinin' away 'cause you be master in her house. If you was to die, that sign 'ud be up in less than a farnight."

"You thinks I'd ought to die, Uncle?"

"'Twould cheer up Sairy. She'd be on her own again."

Sam scratched his head, staring ruefully at Uncle. Then he said deprecatingly:

"I can't hurry up wi' my dyin', Uncle, although you knows I be allers ready to oblige. Your gert brain, seemin'ly, be out o' whack this marning."

"I bain't meself," murmured Uncle, "till after my second tankard."

Sam ordered two more tankards. Uncle slaked an inexhaustible thirst in silence.

"I has a notion," he declared at last. "'Twould be a rare jest if you lost Garge's money."

"You calls that a jest?"

"Don't 'ee jabber when a man be castin' hounds! Yes, if you went to Sairy an' told her money was gone, she'd be up an' doin' in two two's."

"You be right; she would."

"Wheer be the money?"

"King Garge has it. I dunno wheer he keeps the acshall cash. At Windsor Castle, no doubt, but he has it. Pa'son made that plain. In handin' over five thousand pounds to King Garge I helps to keep 'un snug on throne. Be I to go King Garge?"

He looked very unhappy.

"You bide here an' finish your ale. All be fair in love an' war. War be ragin' 'twixt you an' Sairy acause you hasn't my ripe understandin' o' wimmenfolk. You go to Sairy an' tell her that money be gone."

"She'd never believe it, Uncle, never. She holds King Garge's receipt for the cash, yes, she do. Pa'son give it to me, an' I gives it to her."

"We be fair bunkered," murmured Uncle, who

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carried golf clubs at Hernshaw Magna. "'Twill take a niblick to get us out o' this."

He drank some more ale. Sam could see that the great man was rising to heights. He waited patiently. And not in vain. Uncle finished his tankard and spoke, Homerically, winged words :

"I minds me Garge was bigger 'n you, Sam, wi' more gumption to 'un. Did Sairy ever see Garge?"

"Never."

"Garge must come back from the tomb."

"Tomb! 'Tisn't known in Nether-Applewhite, but pore Garge was killed by cannibals an' eaten. He had no Christian berrial. Me an' Sairy don't want that cried i' parish."

"Garge," murmured Uncle, "was allers ready for a lark."

"You has strange notions about larks, I do declare."

"Tch! I says that pore Garge, if he was wi' us, 'ud tell 'ee what to do. But 'twould bother him, same as it do me, whether or no you was man enough to do it."

"I'll do anything, anything, to save Sairy. She'll be singin' in the heavenly choir wi' Garge afore we knows wheer we is."

"The job could be done to rights 'bout night-fall," said Uncle. "I reckons Garge must ha' grown a full beard. I'll say no more 'n this. Garge must come back. Garge must git that receipt from Sairy an' be seen no more. Then Sairy 'll hang up her sign."

5

About four days later Sarah was sitting in her parlour darning Sam's socks. It had rained most of the day and the wind whimpered in the trees, as if complaining that spring was belated. Sarah, however, told herself that she didn't care whether spring

Sarah

came quickly or slowly. Only a year before she had been busy with her preparations to entertain the trippers. Benches and chairs had to be painted green; the "Old Staffordsheer" had to be arranged carefully; the strawberry plants and raspberry canes exacted constant attention. What a labour of love it had all been, to be sure. This reflection was constantly in her mind. Those who know nothing of the rural districts may express mild astonishment that such a woman, endowed with natural executive ability, a worker from earliest youth, should have tamely resigned herself to inaction. The explanation is simple enough. Sarah had been taken suddenly out of a deep groove wherein she had moved automatically during forty years. Parson Hamlin—and none understood his parishioners better—gave sound advice when he counselled the buying of War Bonds. He knew that artless people, knowing nothing of money, would be at the mercy of rogues. The money, properly invested, would be safe. The income from it would secure comfort to Sam and Sarah for the rest of their lives. He did not foresee—who could?—the inner workings of Sam's mind; he did not realize what Sarah's activities meant to her. He supposed that Sam would go on working, as he did. When he learnt that the sign was taken down, he took for granted that Sarah wished to work less hard. He envisaged her, humorously, as a *maitresse femme*. She would do what she liked when and where she liked.

Jerked from her deep groove, Sarah lay panting upon the smooth sward of a fictitious prosperity. Mental worry affected her physically, till she reached the point when it seems hardly worth while to get up in the morning. The strongest amongst us, not the weaklings, suffer most when they are constrained to "rot at ease."

A loud knock roused Sarah from her sombre thoughts. By now she had come to regard neigh-

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bours as nuisances. She resented importunate knocks upon her door. Before opening it she peeped through the casement. By the fading light of a March afternoon she could see a rough-looking customer, heavily bearded. Probably he had called to see Sam, who might be back any minute. Sarah opened the door, not too wide.

"Be Sam Beard at home?"

Some familiar tone in the husky voice arrested her attention. She wondered vaguely who the stranger was.

"Sam bain't home. Likely as not you'll find him at the Pomfret Arms."

"Be you Mrs. Beard?"

Cautiously Sarah admitted that she was Sam's wife. The stranger, speaking more huskily than ever, continued:

"I be come from t'other side o' the world to see Sam. I brings strange tidin's o' great joy."

"Please step in," said Sarah. "Sam 'll be here-along soon."

A large man stepped into the room and removed his hat. Sarah stared at the most hairy individual she had ever seen. He wore loose-fitting clothes, and his trousers were tucked into his big boots. Sarah dusted a chair mechanically and invited the stranger to sit down. She was quite sure that he had come from Australia, from the wildest part of it.

"I bain't fixed up right an' proper to talk to a lady."

"I bain't a lady," said Sarah. "Did you know Garge?"

"Brothers," rumbled the hairy one. "We was brothers—in the bush. What I had was Garge's. You knowed Garge?"

"Never! Garge left for furrin parts afore I merried Sam."

"So he telled me. Hark!"

Approaching steps were heard outside.

Sarah

"'Tis Sam," said Sarah.

A moment later Sam entered. He stared at the stranger, obviously not prepossessed by his appearance.

"Who be you?" he asked.

The hairy one rose to his full stature.

"You knows me, Sam, don't 'ee?"

"No, I doesn't. If I'd seen such a man afore I should know him."

"I be your brother Garge."

Sarah jumped up, trembling.

"Garge!" she exclaimed. She looked at Sam. For the first time in her married life she was unable to make a guess at what was passing in his mind. Sam said slowly:

"Garge was killed by cannibals an' eaten."

"Aye, so 'twas thought. They blacks got me right enough. An', maybe, I wasn't the tasty mossel they fancied. Likely as not I didn't fatten up to suit 'em. Anyways, I kep' out o' fryin' pan. Bein' what I be, I might ha' stayed wi' 'em, an' become king, but I never did take kindly to their sinful habits. So I 'scaped. An' here I be."

"You talks like Garge," said Sam heavily.

"I be Garge, I tell 'ee. An' 'tis pleasant to be alive again i' the old Forest. I've a notion to merry an' settle down as you has, Sam. I knowed you'd pick a winner."

Sarah interrupted him.

"If you be Garge, tell us what you left Sam in your las' will an' testyment?"

"I left 'un five thousand pounds," said the hairy one. "It comed to that, so I larned afterwards. I left Sam all I had. 'Twasn't much at the time, but they says to me, they says: 'You must make your will afore you goes amongst they blacks,' an' I done it."

"'Tis Garge," murmured Sam.

He approached the hairy one and held out his

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hand, which was shaken with affecting violence. Sarah, wondering whether she ought to offer a cheek, offered her hand, which was pressed tenderly.

"You'll bide wi' us," she said with decision. "Your money be safe—all of it."

The hairy one made a superb gesture, a gesture which seemed familiar to Sarah.

"Money!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "I hopes you don't think I comed home just for that. I allers liked Sam. We never had no words, did us, Sam?"

"Never," affirmed Sam solemnly.

Sarah eyed the long lost brother critically.

"What you wants is a good wash, Garge. 'Twould be a sin to put 'ee into clean sheets. Maybe you'll kindly excuse me while I gets things ready for 'ee."

The hairy one said hastily:

"I won't bide wi' 'ee to-night. I left my blankets over Puddenhurst way an' tramped it here."

"Did 'ee? Well, you be my brother now, an' you eats a meal wi' us, so do 'ee sit down, like a good soul. I'll be back soon as I gets tub ready an' water bilin'."

She bustled out, full of energy. Sam said in a low whisper:

"Uncle——"

"Tch! Call me Garge."

"Sairy 'll have her way wi' 'ee."

Uncle smiled through his face-warmers.

"You leave Sairy to me, Sam. I bain't afeard o' no 'ooman. I means to bide an' have a notable supper."

As he spoke an outside door slammed. Sam grinned.

"Sairy be fixin' tub in outhouse. You looks wonnerful, but you made too free wi' the dirt. Sairy, when she be in trim, puts cleanliness afore Godliness. Anyways, she bain't flustrated at seein' 'ee."

Sarah

"Tickled to death," murmured Uncle.

"An' she'll hand over receipt. But it fair beats me why God A'mighty made wimmenfolk so queer. Sairy, seemin'ly, has no use for money onless she earns it herself. Now, I've had a mort o' pleasure in spendin' pore Garge's money."

"You ain't spent much o' it," murmured Uncle.

They talked on, discreetly lowering their voices. Presently their tongues clave to their palates as they heard voices outside the cottage, on the flagged path leading from the road. The door opened. Sarah appeared, followed by Jane Mucklow, Uncle's wife.

"I minded me," said Sarah, "that Aunt Jane an' Uncle Habakkuk knowed Garge, so I stepped down village. Uncle bain't home yet, but Aunt Jane couldn't wait for 'un."

Jane Mucklow was a thin, wiry wisp of a woman, an impassioned pessimist after living forty years with Uncle. Jane stared at the hairy one.

"You be Garge Beard?" she piped.

The hairy one grunted something.

"'Tis so dark I don't see 'ee proper," said Jane.

"I'll light lamp," declared Sarah.

"You get along wi' supper, old 'ooman. Never mind lamp! Garge an' Aunt Jane can tell time o' day wi'out wastin' good ile."

Sarah reached for the match-box. Out of the shadows boomed a husky voice:

"I be so mucked up wi' dirt after traipsin' they muddy roads that I 'lows I'd like a wash afore meetin' comp'ny."

Jane Mucklow said tartly:

"You calls me comp'ny, Garge Beard? Never mind lamp, Sairy. I can say what I've a mind to say."

She approached the hairy one.

"You'd no call, Garge, to come back wi'out fair warnin'. 'Twasn't seemly to my notions, an' Sairy not out o' her blacks yet. You might ha' written,

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or sent tellygram. Anyways, you be herealong, an' Sam, so Sairy tells me, be sartain sure you be his brother Garge as was killed an' eaten. I minds me o' that there Tichborne case when I was a young gel. I minds me his own mother swore 'twas her son. An' she swore to a lie, too. Sam don't know hisself when he has a skiful o' ale. You be a bigger man than Garge Beard."

Thus challenged, the hairy one replied valiantly :

"They blacks fattened me up, wi' evil intentions, I makes no doubt."

"Ah-h-h ! I don't blame 'em for not eatin' such a hairy man, smellin' so strong, too, of ale an' terbacker. Afore I shakes 'ee by hand I wants to ax questions."

"You ax 'em," growled the wanderer.

"I knowed your mother. What were her maiden name?"

The hairy one shook his head mournfully.

"When they blacks caught me," he replied, in accents of deepest self-pity, "they banged me on top o' head—a very fearsome blow. When I comed to I'd forgotten me own name. Mother's maiden name now? I axes you, were it Henbest?"

"No."

"It might ha' been—Purkess?"

"It might ha' been, no doubt. Never heard tell o' Broomfield, did 'ee?"

"Ah-h-h, you be right. Mary Ann Broomfield, to be sure !"

"You be too sure. 'Twasn't Broomfield neither. I was testin' of 'ee in my simple way. Light lamp, Sairy."

Sarah did so. The small parlour looked more comfortable than the two conspirators. Jane stared at the hairy one. Then she burst out laughing. Still laughing, she fell back into the arms of Sarah, who laughed with her. They clung to each other, laughing uproariously.

Sarah

"I be goin'," said the hairy one.

Jane stopped laughing.

"'Tis high time," she said severely. "But you listens to me first. Sairy suspicioned something when you come in, Mr. Habakkuk Mucklow."

Uncle moistened parched lips with a feverish tongue. Jane continued:

"You bain't no play actor, not even a barn-starmer. Sairy knowed 'ee when you started a-wavin' your arm, same as squire do. Puttin' a pebble in mouth didn't deceive her no way, nor me neither. Now home you comes wi' me, you gert grand man, an' I'll tell 'ee what I thinks of 'ee. Sairy 'll say summat private to Sam."

She went to the door and opened it.

Uncle passed out in significant silence.

6

Left alone together, Sam and Sarah eyed each other nervously. Sarah, to her husband's dismay, sank into a chair and burst into tears. Sam rushed from the parlour and into a shed where benches and chairs and small tables were piled high upon each other. He came back with a board in his hand—Sarah's sign. Without a word he placed the board in her lap.

"What be this?"

"Your sign. Put 'un up to-morrer."

Then very slowly, with interminable divagations, Sam explained everything. As slowly Sarah's face brightened. Once again she realized that Sam, in his odd fashion, had been thinking of her, a consoling reflection for any woman after many years of married life. She may have realized, too, the effect of her suffering upon him. When he had finished new and potent energy informed her voice:

"You was willin' to lose all that money, Sam?"

"You knows that now, dearie."

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"Be you willin' for me to get to work again?"

"Aye. Me an' Uncle be o' one mind about that, Sairy. You be a money-getter. 'Tis meat an' drink to 'ee. An' seein' they dratted chariabangers carryin' money past your door came nigh on killin' 'ee. I fair hated to see you a-waitin' on 'em, but from now on the more you gets out of 'em the better I'll be pleased. You put up sign."

"No," said Sarah. She hesitated, selecting her words, trying to put into speech the thoughts of many months.

"'Tis a gift wi' me, Sam. But those happy days be gone. You was right so far as you went. Folks wi' big money make theirselves redic'lous a-scrabblin' after sixpences. I has a notion that squire 'ud be willin' to risk summat if we risked five thousand pounds."

"You means?"

"I means the Pomfret Arms. Tain't much more 'n an alehouse. I made money wi' my teas. You knows what I can do wi' dinners an' suppers. I sees the Pomfret Arms as the fav'rite house o' call 'twixt Melchester an' Puddenhurst. Squire talked to 'ee about lettin' the fishin'. It's in me, Sam, to make things comfortable for anglers. An', down by river, you'd catch trouts for them as never wetted a line afore. If I can sell Staffordsheer ware, I can sell bits o' old oak, reel chaney, an' the like. What do 'ee say, Sam?"

Sam kissed her.

"You be master, Sairy. I up an' sees pa'son an' squire to-morrer marning. If you has your way, they chariabangers 'll go down like green grass afore the scythe."

To-day, in Nether-Applewhite, travellers will be well advised to rest and refresh themselves at The Pomfret Arms. The landlady has that happy Gallic inspiration which soars higher than expectation. She

Sarah

endeavours to please hungry tourists by giving them what they want rather than by forcing down their throats meats colder even than charity. If you like the freshest of eggs and cream, trout cooked to a turn, and lavender-scented sheets, they are yours at a reasonable price. In the coffee-room and all over the house are "bits" of old oak and mahogany, which are yours also at a price. The landlady admits candidly that "she knows nothing about 'em." The landlord is to be found by the river, teaching novices how to throw a fly. At six o'clock, in the snug bar, with a tankard before him, you may perceive a large, clean-shaven, red-faced individual, who is an inquire-within-upon-everything connected with the Forest of Ys. He speaks in the highest terms of the Beards, but he doesn't wear one. He has been heard to remark:

"My old 'ooman can't abide hairy men. I did take a notion once to sport face-warmers, but never again, never again!"

A BOILER OF SMALL POTS

I

WHEN Arnold Loyd-Davis took a cottage on the outskirts of Sloden-Pauncefort, the Forest of Ys remained primevally calm. He was not a sportsman, and he didn't play games, partly because he had never in his best days played games well, and partly because he suffered from rheumatism. Between the hours of ten and one in the morning his typewriting machine might be heard clicking industriously. The vicar, the doctor, and perhaps half a dozen other persons knew that he was a purveyor of popular fiction. Unhappily, Arnold's particular brand of fiction was not in itself popular, although it sufficed to support an old bachelor. He paid his bills with exemplary regularity on the first of each month; and he saw to it personally that the bills contained no overcharges. The village children spoke of him kindly; he scattered a largesse of copper; he asked questions not answered too truthfully; and sometimes he accompanied the youngsters to their cottages. The vicar, when he heard of this, hazarded the conjecture that Loyd-Davis might be making a study of rural conditions. The vicar's wife said that he was a recluse, inasmuch as he refused invitations to play bridge or drink tea with people of his own class. Within a year he added a room to his cottage, and the few who entered the sanctuary were impressed. It held many books, some porcelain and prints. The furniture was of old oak. Of these possessions Arnold could and did talk with mild enthusiasm. But invariably he was accepted by his

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neighbours as a negligible quantity. They couldn't understand him, although, with quiet humour, he may have understood them. The squire of Sloden-Pauncefort, Mr. Apperton, of Old Manor, never called upon the new-comer; Mr. Yeo, of The Cedars, was more neighbourly. Arnold returned Mr. Yeo's call. And there the matter ended. Dr. Sandys had to call professionally, and the more he saw of his patient the more he liked him. To the doctor Arnold spoke with candour:

"I know my job. I ought to be a big seller, but I'm not. No complaints. I've come down here to end my days in peace and quiet. I boil my small pots, which never boil over. It doesn't take long for me to make out my income tax returns."

"Same here," said Sandys.

At Christmas Arnold vanished, and was absent for nearly three weeks. He returned to Sloden-Pauncefort with two children. If he had returned with two baby hippopotami the village could hardly have been more excited. To whom did these children belong? Tongues wagged indefatigably. With the children—a boy and a girl—came a nurse, a discreet woman, who, to the rage of the village, did not wag her tongue, although she could use it, as the gossips soon discovered when they asked questions.

"Mr. Davis," she said, "has adopted the children, and that's all I know about it."

The gaffers in the village discussed the children over pots of small ale. Old Bunce had a word to say:

"They be wholesome kiddies, seemin'ly, wi' rare appetites, I'll be bound."

Long Tom Misselbrook, who attended chapel (at his wife's command), complained querulously:

"My old 'ooman be sartain sure that they kids bain't 'dopted 'uns. For why? 'Cause, so she says, we men be selfish sinners. Yas; she has it that wi' present prices no old bachelor out o' county asylum

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'ud 'dopt kiddies onless they was insured an' like to die. They be love-children, my sonnies."

Old Bunce tossed off his ale and called for a fresh tankard.

"If that be so, Tom, I touches my cap to the gen'leman next time I meets 'un."

"If my old 'ooman could hear 'ee——"

"'Tis God A'mighty's marcy that I be allers too deaf to hear your old 'ooman. I walks in sinners' ways, I do. This Muster Loyd-Davis looks, to my notions, overly much o' the spindly saint."

"It pays ter be respectable, granfer. I marches wi' the quality, I do."

"Aye; and it means a round o' beef to 'ee come Yuletide. An' more coal an' milk than a plain outspoken man can hope to come by. Howsomdever, if these be love-children, I'd like to see more i' the parish."

The rude Doric of the alehouse is soon transposed into the Attic of the drawing-rooms. Indeed, the ladies in the parish, convinced that an old bachelor could know nothing about the care of children, displayed a feverish activity which may have had roots in curiosity. Arnold received them civilly when they bustled into his house; he listened to advice; he smiled courteously, but somehow, with a baffling and exasperating tenacity of purpose, he kept kind busybodies away from the children. Mrs. Merrytree, of Medbery-Hawthorne, a shrewd woman, voiced public opinion on the subject:

"Obviously," she observed to Mrs. Yeo, "this mysterious neighbour of yours takes reasonable precautions to prevent your pumping these little strangers."

Mrs. Yeo was shocked. She replied stiffly:

"I do not get my information by pumping, Mrs. Merrytree."

Mrs. Merrytree laughed.

"I do, when I can."

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Mrs. Yeo nodded majestically, remembering that the speaker was a daughter of a Melchester solicitor. She said with irrelevance :

"The children call Mr. Loyd-Davis daddy."

"Why not, if he has adopted them?"

"Till now," pursued Mrs. Yeo, "we have been happily free from scandal and mystery in Sloden-Pauncefort."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Mrs. Merrytree.

There was no cause for scandal and no mystery. Ill-luck, so some believe, dogs the fortunes of certain families and worries them into misfortunes. Arnold's brother had been unlucky from the cradle to the grave. He had been most unlucky in marrying a pretty woman who became a morphinomaniac. Arnold believed that the wife's vice killed her husband. He died of pneumonia because the wish to live had been atrophied. After his death Arnold supported the widow and children. To do so he wrote pot-boilers, feuilletons, the stuff that our high-brows disdain. Probably he had just missed success as a popular writer because he wrote with his tongue in his cheek. Till his brother died he had travelled the high road. And he had touched, barely touched, a *succès d'estime*. It was galling to reflect that necessity, and a necessity not his own, had driven him to the lower road when the peaks were in sight. Eventually a poor creature, lovable in her saner moments, was buried beside her husband. Arnold was left with the children. They were of an age to remember horrors, to be affected seriously by horrors if called to mind. Arnold hoped that in the Forest of Ys they would forget them. He was wise enough to engage a confidential servant as nurse, who shared his views. Very soon, he hoped, evil memories would fade and in time be obliterated. To achieve his purpose it was necessary to keep them for a season under surveillance. The hypercritical may suggest that Arnold would have shown more worldly wisdom

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if he had confided the facts to the vicar. He might, at any rate, have mentioned that these children were a nephew and niece. But the man hated to talk about the tragedy in his family, and he had come to the Forest seeking peace. Also it never occurred to him that scandal could attach itself to a middle-aged valetudinarian who had always led a dull and blameless life.

2

Doctor Sandys happened to be the medical attendant of Miss Mottisfont, the aunt of Sir Giles Mottisfont, of Hernshaw Magna, which is some three miles from Sloden-Pauncefort. Miss Mottisfont belonged to the Old Guard. Born and bred a Forester, it is not surprising that moss accumulated upon an otherwise hard and granitic intelligence. In her youth she rode to hounds; in mid-age she consecrated her energies to good works, becoming a stout pillar of the Anglican Church. In old age she was crippled by arthritis. She read omnivorously. Sandys was aware that Miss Mottisfont was particular in acquaintance either with books or her fellow men. She refused to call, for instance, upon Lady Bright because she regarded that eminent horticulturist, Sir Godfrey, as a tradesman.

"We used, I believe, to buy our seeds from him," she said to Doctor Sandys.

The doctor liked Miss Mottisfont because she was plucky. She suffered pain with a patience which she did not extend to fools. Pain, so the doctor decided, had sharpened a caustic tongue. She detested humbug in all its protean forms. She deplored social changes which she believed to be revolutionary in character. It was impossible to argue with her. She stigmatized the post-war period as an age of rush and gush. She believed that the honourable profession of letters went down with the *Lusitania*.

Sandys, as medical attendant, could do little for

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Miss Mottisfont. It amused him that she paid him a fixed sum per annum. He was expected to call at stated intervals. He had been asked to luncheon, never to dinner. As a rule the oddly assorted pair talked about books and bookmen.

It occurred to Sandys that Miss Mottisfont would be interested in Arnold Loyd-Davis. But he admitted afterwards that the ways which might have led to friendship were not too discreetly soaped. Before the children appeared Sandys had said :

"I have a patient—quite as patient as you are, Miss Mottisfont—who suffers, as you do, from rheumatism."

"Um !"

"That doesn't interest you?"

"Frankly—no. My physical disabilities, Dr. Sandys, force themselves disagreeably upon my notice. I can't ignore them. I can and I do ignore disease in others."

Sandys was taken aback. Miss Mottisfont subscribed generously to half a dozen hospitals. Perhaps she guessed what was passing through his mind.

"I support, as is my duty, Homes for the Fallen, but I do not visit those institutions."

"Arnold Loyd-Davis is a writer."

"Is he? What has he written? I don't remember his name."

Sandys said guardedly :

"You might not like his work, Miss Mottisfont, but I am sure that you would like the man."

"Um ! If the man doesn't come out in his work, I would rather not know him. Bring me, please, what you consider to be his best book, and when I have read it I will tell you candidly what I think of it."

Sandys obeyed the august lady. He brought her one of Arnold's novels. She read it and dismissed it with one word :

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"Trash!"

Sandys murmured deprecatingly:

"I feared that verdict. Arnold Loyd-Davis writes to live. But no man I know has a higher appreciation of English literature."

Miss Mottisfont looked disdainful. Sandys said no more.

Probably Arnold would have never met Miss Mottisfont if he had not excited the wagging of tongues in Sloden-Pauncefort. Mrs. Apperton called at Hernshaw Magna some months after the children arrived.

"A tempest," said Mrs. Apperton, "is raging in our tiny teapot."

"Tell me, my dear. I like tempests, but I have little interest in teapots apart from their everyday uses."

"Mr. Loyd-Davis has adopted two children."

"An old bachelor with two children! The tempest, I imagine, must be in his teapot."

"They are very pretty children. There is—a—a resemblance——"

"To each other?"

"To their adopted father."

Miss Mottisfont laughed, although it hurt her to do so. She was tempted to draw out Mrs. Apperton, but, being a gentlewoman and an Anglican, she deemed it her duty to treat the affair seriously.

"I have read one of his novels; much too saccharine for my palate. The writer of that novel is capable of adopting children, but your implied hypothesis doesn't hold water."

"It is not mine. I abominate gossip. I merely repeat it."

"That is the unpardonable sin."

"I—I don't say I believe it."

"But, really, you do. However, supposing that gossip for once is not lying, does the affair concern you?"

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"My dear! What things you say."

"I say odd things on occasion; I don't think them. Mr. Loyd-Davis writes anæmic twaddle."

"I like his books."

"Do you? So does my maid. I conceive they have a sale. In Upper Tooting, I dare say, mixed Loyd-Davis is sold by the hundredweight. The man himself must be respectable and dull *à faire frémir*. Have the caterpillars attacked the oaks at Old Manor?"

"Alas! yes," replied Mrs. Apperton.

3

Mrs. Apperton took her leave without further mention of the tempest, but it rumbled in the ears of Miss Mottisfont like thunder a score of miles away. She remembered what the doctor had affirmed about Mr. Loyd-Davis. He wrote to live! An alert imagination played with this theme. And the man, so Sandys stated, was different from his work. Sandys liked him. The fact that a stranger had adopted two children left an aged spinster cold. Miss Mottisfont's maternal instincts had never bloomed. Her lively fancy, beneath accretions of moss, envisaged an old bachelor boiling his pot for three instead of one. The poignancy of this did not escape her.

"If he hates doing it——" she reflected.

Glimpsed, no more, from a new angle, Arnold Loyd-Davis challenged attention. She fully intended to speak to Dr. Sandys about him, but she didn't. Arnold seemed to flit in and out of her mind at odd moments. Sandys was the first to speak of him.

"I'm uneasy about my friend, Loyd-Davis," he said.

"Ah! You are speaking as his doctor?"

"As his doctor I have cause for uneasiness. He would enjoy a longer lease of life if he worked less hard. No; it isn't that."

Leaves from Arcady

"What is it?"

"I have missed from his room two valuable prints, an Early Worcester teapot, and a gate-leg table."

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Miss Mottisfont.

"Your apt word," said Sandys, "must re-echo in his ears. Everything is shockingly dear, particularly small boots and shoes. I fear there is not enough for three. He is working after dinner, poor fellow. I am most uneasy."

"Is it drudgery?"

"I'm afraid so. Not the least of his trials is the reading of letters from admirers of your sex, Miss Mottisfont."

"I can guess what they say. I have listened to my maid."

"He showed me a fervent epistle this morning with a derisively pathetic smile. It was written on very expensive notepaper by a rich woman in Moscombe."

"I'm sure he is popular in Moscombe."

"I have sometimes wondered," continued Sandys, "why authors are never mentioned in wills. This rich woman, for example, whom I happen to know, writes to Loyd-Davis to tell him that his books have given her the greatest pleasure. She is a confirmed invalid, suffering from insomnia."

"I can understand why she reads his books."

"You like your joke, Miss Mottisfont; but this is no joke. Loyd-Davis's books, whatever you may think of them, have been a joy and solace to this woman. They have beguiled weary hours. But it wouldn't occur to her to leave money, which she can spare, to her favourite author."

"That had never occurred to me," said Miss Mottisfont.

"Or to anybody else. But why not? I can testify, as a doctor, that to many persons reading is the principal pleasure of life."

"It is to me."

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"Just so. But a recognition of indebtedness appears to confine itself to writing effusive letters to the author."

"I have not been guilty of that."

"Large sums of money are sometimes left to personages, eminent soldiers, and statesmen. Nobody, so far as I know, left money to Charles Dickens or Thackeray. But I am boring you."

"Not at all. However, to return to your friend. He has been in my mind, and I accept, with reasonable reservations, your statement that he has an appreciation of English literature. I'm supposed to be a stickler for etiquette. Single ladies, in my day, did not call upon single gentlemen, but I shall venture to call upon Mr. Loyd-Davis to return the book which he kindly lent me."

"He didn't lend it to you."

"I beg your pardon?"

Sandys laughed.

"I purloined it."

"Um! But I need not know that."

"True. He is not very approachable."

"Ah! You hint that his door may be slammed in my aged face."

"More unlikely things have happened, Miss Mottisfont."

"I must take my chance."

Within a week the lady's bath-chair, drawn by a Forest pony led by a groom in the Mottisfont livery, ascended the sharp slope which led to Arnold's front door. Perhaps the greatest of many afflictions had been imposed ruthlessly upon Miss Mottisfont when her increasing infirmity forced her to give up driving a pair of spirited cobs.

"Is Mr. Loyd-Davis at home?"

"Have you an appointment, madam?"

"No. This is my card. I have called upon Mr. Loyd-Davis to return a book of his. I should like to see your master, if he has leisure to receive me."

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A staid house-parlourmaid vanished. As she did so, two children raced round the corner of the cottage, stood still, stared at the resplendent bath-chair and at the elderly lady sitting bolt upright and regarding them with curious rather than kindly eyes. The boy, who might have been seven, took off his cap. Immediately Miss Mottisfont's grim face relaxed.

"How do you do?" he said politely.

The house-parlourmaid reappeared.

"Mr. Loyd-Davis is at home, madam."

Miss Mottisfont nodded. The urchin stepped briskly forward and offered his arm. The old lady was delighted.

"Do you think you can help me?" she asked.

"Sis and I often help daddy, don't we, Sis?"

"Although he hates being helped," replied the little girl.

Miss Mottisfont descended from the bath-chair, took her crutch, and leaned lightly upon the sturdy shoulder so gallantly presented.

"You can go on with your washing-up, Dosia," said the urchin. "Sis and I"—he looked at the visitor—"will take you to daddy."

Miss Mottisfont crossed the threshold of the house, limped down a passage, and was ushered into a long, low room with big windows at the far end opening upon the lawn. The boy said in a clear voice:

"Miss Mottisfont has come to see you, daddy."

The old lady turned sharply upon her cavalier.

"Bless me! How do you know my name?"

"Everybody in the Forest," he replied, "knows you. Sis and I were told, when we saw you at church, that you banged a boy over the head with your crutch 'cause he threw a stone at your pony."

Arnold said hastily:

"Run away, children." He bowed to Miss Mottisfont. "It is very good of you to come to see me."

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"May we nip back, daddy?" asked the boy.

"No."

"Yes," said Miss Mottisfont, "in a few minutes. I value the attentions of young gentlemen, the more, perhaps, because I so seldom receive them."

The children ran off. Miss Mottisfont sank into a chair and gazed about her. Dwarf bookcases lined the walls, and above them, upon soft grey paper, hung many prints and mezzotints. She also perceived a large doll enthroned upon a Jacobean chair. On a sofa were a few toys and picture books. Obviously, this room was more than a workshop, although a huge desk was covered with a workman's tools.

"Theodosia, my servant, mentioned a book. Have you been kind enough to bring me a book?"

"Dr. Sandys lent me a book of yours with your name in it."

She handed it to him. Arnold frowned.

"Dr. Sandys lent you this?"

"At my own request."

Arnold dropped the novel and smiled faintly.

"I am sorry, Miss Mottisfont."

A melancholy sincerity informed his voice. He continued: "Who reads my books, reads trash. . . ."
Trash——!

Had Sandys betrayed her?

The situation, she reflected, was awkward. To save it, she interposed swiftly:

"You are a writer, and Dr. Sandys tells me that you are a reader. So am I. What do you read?"

"Not my own novels."

The answer slightly disturbed her. Why this insistence upon what was personal? He went on placidly:

"I browse here, there and everywhere—biography, *mémoires pour servir*, books of travel, poetry."

"Poetry—um!"

Leaves from Arcady

"I have specialized a little in Shelley and Keats."

"You have written about them?"

"A paper or two—nothing of importance."

"I should like to read what you have written. Keats, to my mind, achieves in poetry what Loti achieves in prose. He conveys atmosphere."

Arnold began to speak of Keats. He talked hesitatingly, but well. Miss Mottisfont believed that she could detect quality wherever she found it. Why, in the name of the Sphinx, couldn't this good man write as he spoke? When he paused, she looked through the open windows. Tall bracken waved outside the tiny garden, once part of the Forest. In the far distance sparkled the Solent. Miss Mottisfont gazed across miles of heather over which she had galloped gaily as a girl. Now she and the man opposite to her were halting down the slopes of life, the one supported by a crutch, the other by a stout stick that served the same purpose.

"You have come to live here, Mr. Loyd-Davis, but do you know the Forest?"

"I tramped over all of it years ago."

"Does it inspire you to write about it?"

"Write about it——? If I were a young man, beginning again. . . ." His voice died away.

Miss Mottisfont was not unmoved. She divined the pathos which underlies all human achievement branded as failure. But little sympathy coloured her tones as she remarked sharply:

"I'm astonished that so little has been written about the Forest. Artists assure me that it is difficult to paint. Probably it is as difficult to describe. But the thing has been done. I am speaking of novels."

"Oh, yes," said Arnold indifferently.

Miss Mottisfont returned to Keats and Shelley. Presently the children came back. They rushed in as if sure of a welcome. Miss Mottisfont stood up. Arnold, as a man, interested her, but she was unable

A Boiler of Small Pots

to pass swift judgment upon him. She said graciously :

"Will you drink tea with me some afternoon, soon?"

"I shall be delighted."

"May we come with daddy?" asked the boy.

"Certainly not," said Arnold.

Miss Mottisfont eyed two eager faces.

"I insist upon entertaining the three of you," she said with finality.

4

The promised entertainment took place. The children were shown prize rabbits, prize pigeons, prize pigs and ponies. Miss Mottisfont and Arnold talked about books. As soon as they were alone after tea, the lady handed to her guest two volumes.

"Have you read these?"

Arnold glanced at them.

"You like them?" he asked.

"Immensely."

The books were entitled, respectively, "Smoke" and "Forest Fires." To refresh his memory, Arnold glanced at the title page.

"Sylvia Dod," he murmured. "These are old books, Miss Mottisfont. I read them years ago. Aren't they about gypsies?"

"Yes; you don't answer my question. I infer that Miss Dod's work didn't appeal to you. Perhaps they are not men's books. Being a woman, I may be biased. Nobody but a woman could have put into descriptive writing so much feeling, so much delicate sympathy never degenerating into sentimentality."

"I thought the books indicated promise," said Arnold. "Perhaps the descriptions were overdone. Sylvia Dod never approached Borrow, although I suspect her of playing 'the sedulous ape' to him."

Miss Mottisfont looked cross.

Leaves from Arcady

"It was the originality in Miss Dod's works that captivated me. Obviously, they failed to please you."

"Failed to satisfy me, let us say. I remember, at the time, that Sylvia Dod was accused of being 'precious' and anæmic."

"Anæmic——!"

Arnold laughed.

"I have offended you. To make amends, I'll tell you something. I knew Miss Dod. At one time we were friends."

He spoke softly. Instantly Miss Mottisfont wondered whether the pair had been more than friends. Arnold continued, in a harsher tone:

"Unhappily, we didn't remain friends. Sylvia Dod was something of a highbrow. She resented my—my lapse into pot-boiling. But it had to be."

"Is Miss Dod still alive?"

"Oh, yes."

"I should like to meet her. If you can tell me anything more about her, I should be obliged."

"I can tell you this," his eyes twinkled. "Miss Dod had to descend from her pedestal. She drifted, as I did, into journalism."

"But why?"

"Necessity. She had no independent means."

"*Une vie manquée!*" exclaimed Miss Mottisfont. "I am grieved. I cannot find words to express my disgust. It might have been better for such a sensitive creature if she had died. To struggle on against odds, to renounce ambitions, to become a hack-writer. . . ."

She broke off abruptly. Arnold's fine eyes were upon hers.

"I beg your pardon," she muttered. "I—I am sorry. Pray forgive me!"

"There is nothing to forgive, Miss Mottisfont. You assume that Miss Dod would have succeeded, as the world reckons success, if Fate had been kinder to her?"

A Boiler of Small Pots

"I do assume that."

"It's a generous assumption. I'm not a successful writer, but I doubt the existence of 'mute inglorious Miltons.' Merit is recognized in the end. It's possible that Sylvia Dod lacked the great gift of the gods—vitality, the will to conquer. Let us hope that she found compensations."

"Compensations?"

"A sensitive creature, as you call her, is sensitive to so much in life that is greater than success."

"Ah! She has married, perhaps."

"Not to my knowledge."

Miss Mottisfont was disappointed. She had expected enthusiasm, the glad acclaim. Possibly Arnold Loyd-Davis was too tired to display enthusiasm about anything or anybody. But he had warmed up over Shelley and Keats—!

She showed him her books and her china; but here again his views clashed with hers. In the cabinets rare specimens of Chelsea and Bow stood beside rubbish.

"You would get rid of the rubbish, Mr. Loyd-Davis?"

"I should put it elsewhere."

"All that china, good, bad and indifferent, belonged to my mother. She arranged it, not I."

"I quite understand." He bowed courteously.

Miss Mottisfont retorted:

"I saw a large fat doll upon a Jacobean chair in your room."

He laughed like a jolly boy.

"You have me! You have me! Let us agree, frankly, that sentiment, even if it degenerates into sentimentality, is quite irresistible."

He went away with the children, promising to come back, but Fate ordained that he and Miss Mottisfont should not meet again. Within a week of this first visit the old lady took to her bed. Sandys was not in the habit of discussing the condition of

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one patient with another, but he made an honourable exception of Arnold because the cases were not dissimilar. Through Sandys Arnold learnt that Miss Mottisfont was sinking. She passed away in her sleep some three weeks later. Sandys was surprised because Arnold attended her funeral. He could perceive that his friend was affected. As a doctor he wondered whether Arnold's emotion was due to the fact that he suffered from the same disease to which Miss Mottisfont had succumbed. He considered the propriety of writing a letter, assuring his friend that his case was far from desperate and still amenable to treatment. He decided to speak to him and not write.

Next day he presented himself at Arnold's house at an hour when, as a rule, the typewriting machine was clicking. The boiler of small pots was not at work, but stretched full length upon a sofa. No book was in his hand.

"This is unlike you," said Sandys briskly, as Arnold rose to receive him.

"I couldn't grind out the stuff this morning. I'm dithered. I'm afraid I must go back to London. One loses touch, you know. Some of my editors have retired. Their successors know not Joseph."

Sandys said gravely :

"You ought to stay here. Sloden-Pauncefort agrees with you and the children."

"I must leave on the children's account."

And then, briefly, he told Sandys the truth. He couldn't afford to live in the Forest. Sandys listened. As a friend of the speaker he was distressed; as a doctor he felt exasperated. But there was nothing to be said. As he rose to leave he remarked tartly :

"By the way, I have come to you this morning upon a matter connected with Miss Mottisfont. Before she died she added a codicil to an old will of hers, and your name is mentioned in it."

"My name, Sandys?"

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"Not," replied Sandys gruffly, "as a beneficiary." He paused a moment. The good fellow had hoped—quite unreasonably—that a rich woman might, if sufficiently interested, see her way to help a lame dog over a stiff stile. He would have been put to it if a cynic had asked him if Miss Mottisfont could give, or if Arnold could receive, a substantial grant in aid. He continued:

"It seems that Miss Mottisfont admired tremendously the work of an author unknown to me, a Miss Sylvia Dod. You gave her some information about Miss Dod."

"I did."

"Well, she has left Miss Dod five thousand pounds."

"You don't say so!"

"With this proviso. She is to write another novel about the Forest. Miss Mottisfont's solicitor asked me to find out from you the name of an editor or publisher who knows Miss Dod's present address."

"You say that Miss Mottisfont has left five thousand pounds to Sylvia Dod?"

"Yes; free of legacy duty, upon the condition I have named."

Arnold nodded.

"Right. I dare say I can get in touch with Miss Dod. This will be a windfall for her. Miss Mottisfont has done a kind and generous thing."

Sandys hesitated, frowning. Then he laughed.

"I believe I put the idea into her head, but I wasn't thinking of Miss Dod." He glanced at his watch. "I'm late for an appointment. Now, look here, my dear fellow, you mustn't go back to drudgery in London. Quite frankly, it will unpick all my stitches."

Arnold made a deprecating gesture.

Sandys said impulsively:

"I—I wish with all my heart that my old friend had left this money to you."

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"Thanks! Miss Mottisfont was civil to me. I have no reason to suppose that I found favour with her as a man. Certainly she despised me as a writer."

5

Within four days Arnold wrote to his doctor asking him to drop in when he happened to be passing. Sandys came at once. He found his patient slightly excited and oddly rejuvenated.

"I have run Miss Dod to ground, Sandys."

"Have you? The ardour of the chase seems to have binged you up."

"At first Miss Dod refused absolutely to accept this legacy."

"The lady must be a bit cracked."

"Suspend judgment for a moment. At the time when Sylvia Dod's first novel was published, the author was working in a Government office, and well aware that an ill-paid job might be lost if the authorities knew that a clerk was writing novels. They would assume, which was not the case, that public work was being neglected for private profit. Accordingly, two novels were published under a pseudonym."

"Under a pseudonym?"

"They were praised by the reviewers; they were not bought by the general public. But Sylvia Dod had learnt to write; an apprenticeship had been served. So Sylvia Dod chucked the clerkship and tackled journalism."

Sandys said sharply:

"You must have been an intimate friend of Sylvia Dod's."

"I have called myself Sylvia Dod's worst enemy. Let me finish. I took upon myself to advise the author of 'Smoke' to write to please the mob. You can understand, perhaps, that having achieved slight distinction one might shrink from writing novelettes under the same pseudonym?"

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"I do understand that. But what has this to do with Miss Sylvia Dod, whoever she may be, refusing to accept a legacy?"

"Simply because the money was left by a woman to a woman."

"I can't follow you."

"Sylvia Dod happens to be a man. Could a man accept five thousand pounds left to a woman?"

"I say—yes. The money was left to an author. If Sylvia Dod refuses this legacy he is a darned fool."

"I have often told him so. However, something happened only yesterday which has induced Sylvia Dod to reconsider his decision."

Arnold walked to a table, and took from it a thin book bound in white vellum, which he handed to Sandys with a faint smile upon his face. Sandys glanced at it.

"Divagations upon Shelley and Keats." Sandys read aloud the title.

"By Sylvia Dod," added Arnold. "When Miss Mottisfont called here we talked about Shelley and Keats. This book was sent to me to-day. It was brought by Miss Mottisfont's maid. Her mistress had instructed her to give the book into my hands and to ask me to look at the title-page. I did so. Will you?"

Sandys turned over two pages. The title page bore the "imprimatur" of a famous firm. But, under the name of the author, in the shaky handwriting of a dying woman, had been pencilled another name. Sandys was quick to perceive that Sylvia Dod's pseudonym was an anagram cunningly fashioned out of a real name.

"Sylvia Dod," said Arnold, "hid from a too inquisitive world, but not from Miss Mottisfont, the commonplace name of Loyd-Davis. I'm wondering whether Loyd-Davis will be able to make good again as Sylvia Dod."

SIEVES

I

"My dear," said Mrs. Mifflin, "you are getting prettier every day."

Loveday exhibited pleasure and surprise.

Ever since the child came out at the Puddenhurst Hunt Ball, which takes place in April, Mrs. Mifflin had regarded her with sorrowful and sympathetic eyes. The superfluity of women over men in the United Kingdom was a crown of thorns to the good lady, still on the sunny side of sixty, and young for her years inasmuch as she kept in touch with ebullient youth. Boys and girls confided in Mrs. Mifflin—particularly girls.

At the ball, Loveday Thorburn, daughter of Captain Thorburn, R.N., had been conspicuous as a "back-seater." Why? The right young men seemed to be attracted to the wrong young women. Loveday happened to be what Mrs. Mifflin regarded, almost reverentially, as "just right."

A maid's pleasure and surprise were expressed—according to Mrs. Mifflin—the more prettily, because she said nothing. A dimple played hide and seek with a smile—nothing more. Mrs. Mifflin lowered her voice:

"Has any young fellow told you so?"

"Not—not when I was wide awake."

"That is most exasperating," murmured the elder lady.

She eyed her guest critically. They were alone, drinking tea in Mrs. Mifflin's garden upon a fine June afternoon. Not a hundred yards away, Captain

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Thorburn was working in his garden, to which he gave undivided energies, and there we will leave him.

"I hate compliments," said Loveday.

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Mrs. Mifflin. "However, you are only eighteen."

"Nearer nineteen," amended Loveday.

"And—and you have never been in love?"

Mrs. Mifflin adored romance. Every tale whispered into her Victorian ear became transmuted into romance. If it were told crudely, Mrs. Mifflin added a gloss. Under other conditions she might have made a mark as a writer of fiction.

Staring at Loveday, and frowning slightly, Mrs. Mifflin decided that the child was too prim. Mothers with marriageable daughters, living in and about the noble Forest of Ys, were kind to Loveday because they regarded her as negligible. She lacked the "come hither" expression so alluring to young men. She suffered from shyness. She hid her feelings and her legs under pre-war skirts of convention. She never smoked cigarettes. She blushed at the strong language of "flappers." In a word, she was labelled, before she was out of her 'teens, as a putative old maid of the lavender scented variety soon to be extinct in Great Britain. For the moment such demure damsels are under eclipse.

Loveday remained silent. But her too pale cheeks were tinged with rose colour.

"Tell me," murmured Mrs. Mifflin.

"I—I—really couldn't."

"Nonsense, child, you can tell me anything—anything! Whatever I may be I'm not a sieve, and I'm very fond of you."

"Perhaps I have been in love."

"Ah-h-h!"

"Only in my dreams."

"Only in your dreams?"

"Yes; I should like to tell you about it, but I don't know how to begin."

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"Begin—at the beginning," commanded Mrs. Mifflin.

Loveday sighed, smiled, and lay back in her garden chair, half closing her eyes. She was wearing a becoming frock of her own making. Mrs. Mifflin noted with approval well-brushed brown hair with a wave in it, delicate features, and the tender curves of a slender figure. Why did men pass Loveday by? Because, of course, the bashful goose turned aside from them. Was it the duty of a childless old woman to play nurse to such an artless child?

"It was not a dream at the beginning. . . . I had wandered into the Forest, down the grass ride which leads to the enclosure behind our garden."

"Yes, yes."

"There is a very old oak just inside the enclosure with a sign on it: 'Sugaring of trees strictly forbidden.' . . ."

Mrs. Mifflin nodded. She loved corroborative detail. She had a more than passing acquaintance with this old oak. She had sat under it, the hoary sentinel of an enchanted glade.

"I was sketching under the oak when HE appeared."

"Can you describe him?"

Loveday betrayed uneasiness.

"I hope," said Mrs. Mifflin trenchantly, "that he had straight legs and an open countenance."

"I didn't notice his legs," said Loveday pensively. "But I think they must have been all right, because," she added ingenuously, "I'm sure I should have noticed them if they weren't. His face was nice and brown, an open-air face, and his eyes were blue—really blue, not a compromise between grey and green and blue."

"Forget-me-not blue?"

"Yes—forget-me-not blue."

Mrs. Mifflin sighed. She detected in Loveday's soft voice a faint inflexion of sadness. It is possible

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that forget-me-not blue eyes had tinged memories of her own. Anyway, she spoke with a certain sharpness:

"My dear, that brand of eyes is a greater asset than moral rectitude; but, according to my experience, the men who have them are dreamers rather than doers."

"He carried a butterfly net."

"Did he?"

Mrs. Mifflin pursed a sensitive mouth. Wrinkled interrogation sat upon her placid brow. We may guess that she was endeavouring to "place" this young man who carried a butterfly net. No sprig of gentility, in or about Puddenhurst, pursued butterflies. But unerring instinct told her that this lepidopterist with forget-me-not blue eyes was no creature of a girl's fancy, but a personality.

Loveday went on, still dreamily:

"He was a stranger to the Forest. And he had lost his way. He began by telling me that."

"Ah! I wonder now if he started acquaintance with you by—by fibbing."

Loveday replied indignantly:

"Most certainly not."

Mrs. Mifflin said hastily:

"I shouldn't blame him too severely if he had. If he fibbed, he fibbed like a gentleman. And then——?"

"And then he marched off towards Brackenford."

"Is that all, child?"

"No. It was hot, and I suppose I fell asleep. He stole back in my dream. Perhaps young men are unconventional in dreams. But I liked it. I know that I ought to have snubbed him when he became——"

She hesitated, blushing. Mrs. Mifflin adroitly suggested a word:

"Enterprising?"

"Yes, you can call it that."

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"What did he do, my dear?"

"He held my hand. I—I let him do it—in my dream—and presently he kissed it. I wonder I didn't wake up then."

"Perhaps you did."

Loveday smiled almost roguishly into her friend's kind eyes. By this time the good lady was convinced that this innocent narrative was founded on fact. Very wisely she didn't say so. Moreover, she was beholding a new Loveday, radiating the greatest thing in the world—first love. This new Loveday asked an irrelevant question:

"Do you think, Mrs. Mifflin, that the real self, the inmost me in us, peeps out of our dreams?"

"It may be so, Loveday. Simple hearts, I fancy, do surrender almost unconditionally at the first genuine assault."

"Assault——?"

"The word may be too harsh. However, you admit that you responded to the advance of your dream prince?"

"Yes, I did."

"Which did not discourage him?"

"No."

"You shy girls are most astonishing on occasion——!"

"We talked quite freely about love. I suppose anything may happen in a dream."

Mrs. Mifflin replied austere:

"I put limits to what may happen in dreams, child; but tell me frankly—what did happen?"

"Something quite incredible. Perhaps I had better say no more. Yes; I should hate to shock you."

To be fair to a constant churchgoer and communicant, we must admit that Mrs. Mifflin didn't wish to be shocked by Loveday, but already she was conscious of shock. And curiosity had a stranglehold on discretion.

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"Having said so much, dear, you may as well finish."

"He kissed me and I kissed him. I—I enjoyed it. It has been on my conscience ever since that I enjoyed this wicked, wicked kissing—tremendously."

"Oh, my dear! You take my breath away."

"He took my breath away."

"And he was a gentleman?"

"Of course."

Mrs. Mifflin pulled herself together.

"Kissing, in dreams," she said tentatively, "can hardly be stigmatized as—wicked."

"But it was wicked, very wicked, under the circumstances. Before he kissed me I knew that he was engaged to be married."

"Good gracious me!"

"Even in dreams, I suppose, one holds hard on to the rags of self-respect. But he told me all about her, because—because——"

"Yes, child?"

"Because, as he put it, I was Miss Right and she was Miss Wrong. I felt so sorry for him——"

"And for yourself——?"

"Yes; and for myself—that I cried. He began by kissing away my tears. I ought to have resisted. I—I didn't. We were so sorry for each other that nothing else seemed to matter. If he had asked me to follow him to the ends of the earth I should have obeyed."

"But he didn't?"

"No—he didn't. I mean I woke up before he did, and—and found myself in an empty world."

She spoke forlornly, with such unconscious pathos that Mrs. Mifflin had to suppress a sniff. Nevertheless, her voice became acidulous as she murmured:

"I'm glad you woke up, child. This is a remarkable dream."

Loveday nodded.

"I told you, because the dream has haunted me

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a little. I feel better now that it is off my chest." Her voice brightened. "But the queer question remains: why do we do things in our dreams that we would never do in real life? And yet the dream was so vivid—so delightful that——"

"You hoped you would dream it again, did you?"

"Ye-es."

Mrs. Mifflin paused before she put her last question. She noticed that Loveday had become prim and demure, that the subtle charm of the teller of dreams had vanished.

"Tell me, child—odd things have happened to me in dreams, and often, indeed usually, they have been connected with real people. I have dreamed, for instance, that I had to appear in the presence of my sovereign with practically nothing on. And in this dream, which I have not dreamt since our gracious Queen died, I was naked but unashamed—unashamed. And always I saw the Queen, in her robes of State, as vividly as I saw myself. Did you recognize in your Fairy Prince any young fellow of my acquaintance?"

"I told you he was a stranger," said Loveday.

2

It is likely that Mrs. Mifflin would have pursued the even tenor of her way without bestowing further thought upon Loveday's dream had it not been brought back to mind in a challenging fashion. Within forty-eight hours she happened to meet her friend Mrs. Merrytree, the wife of the vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne, who, if not a confirmed gossip, might be termed a "*bonne gazette du pays*." Mrs. Merrytree was agog with excitement over an approaching marriage between a certain Major Hoptoun, D.S.O., and Azalea Bright, the eldest daughter of Sir Godfrey Bright, the famous horticulturist, who, having made a fortune out of flowers, named his

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four blooming daughters after them. Happily we are only concerned with Azalea.

Sir Godfrey was regarded both by Mrs. Mifflin and Mrs. Merrytree as a carpet-bagger. He had taken, upon a long lease, a castellated mansion near Brackenford, and at the same time, knowing the nature of the Foresters, he had engaged a French *chef*. It was almost a duty to call upon herbaceous borders, which really justified a knighthood; and if you were asked to luncheon—well, you went away believing that a baronetcy might have been bestowed upon a less deserving host.

The Misses Bright—from Azalea to Petunia—held their own in the hunting field and elsewhere. Admittedly, they were “thrusters.” The Master of the Buck Hounds complained that they “threw their tongues” at inopportune moments, when, perhaps, on a windy day he was listening for hounds, and wishing that he had a strain of Bright blood in his kennels. It was whispered, with or without reason, that Azalea had “captured” a canny Scot, not quite so canny when out of Scotland. The capture had been effected at the hunt ball of which mention has been made, when little Loveday sat neglected with her back against the wall.

“He will find her a handful,” observed Mrs. Merrytree.

“She rides a good twelve stone,” sighed Mrs. Mifflin.

“It’s such a pity, because he might have chosen one of our own dear girls.”

“Yes.”

“He has a way with him—and a dangerous pair of forget-me-not blue eyes.”

“What?”

Mrs. Merrytree repeated the descriptive phrase, adding regretfully: “To my mind forget-me-nots bark at azaleas.”

“Quite—quite.”

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"And of course she is mad about hunting, and he chases butterflies."

"Bless my soul!"

"My dear husband, as you know, collects moths. Major Hopetoun called to see his collection. I was immensely taken with him. Surely you noticed him at the Hunt Ball?"

Mrs. Mifflin nodded. Out of some zone of sub-consciousness emerged a gallant figure. Yes; she had noticed, most particularly, Major Hopetoun. And he had danced attendance upon Azalea Bright unremittingly.

At this rending of the veil which separates things clearly perceived from those mysteries which are discerned but dimly Mrs. Mifflin ought to have held her tongue. But she was swept into a whirlpool of conjecture. A resistless current bore her away, twisted her round and round, till she became vocal. In moments of stress we invoke Omnipotence.

"Heaven help us!" ejaculated Mrs. Mifflin.

"What do you mean, Helen?"

"I—I mean," stammered Mrs. Mifflin, turning congested eyes upon the placid orbs of her friend, "that this marriage ought not to take place."

"And you," said Mrs. Merrytree solemnly, "are the last person in the world to make such a statement without justification."

"I have good reason to believe, my dear, that the young man is head over heels in love with one of our nicest girls, the exact opposite, thank God! of Azalea Bright."

She had no good reason, but our supermen are ever the victims of super-imaginings. Unfortunately, too, for Mrs. Mifflin, she was alone with a friend of many years' standing and understanding. With a casual acquaintance she might have dissembled. More, she spoke with such conviction that this old friend was immensely impressed. If Mrs. Mifflin said so, it was so. The wife of the vicar of

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Medbery-Hawthorne, a daughter of a solicitor who had been the confidential adviser to the Dean and Chapter of Melchester Cathedral, held up her hands in horror. Nevertheless, true to type, distrusting the daughter of a carpet-bagger, she said austere-ly :

"I am not surprised."

"We can put all these misfits down to the war."

"You say that this young man is in love with somebody else."

"I say, Annabella, that he has met a Miss Right who has opened his forget-me-not blue eyes wide to the fact that he is engaged to Miss Wrong. Unhappily, men with such eyes are dreamers rather than doers. He chases butterflies. There is a butterfly, I am told, which is called the Painted Lady. At the Hunt Ball Azalea Bright powdered her nose in the presence of three Masters of Hounds."

"She would," groaned Mrs. Merrytree. "Do I know Miss Right?"

Mrs. Mifflin stiffened. Too late, alas ! she realized that she had been indiscreet.

"You *do* know the poor girl, Annabella, but you mustn't ask her name."

"Heaven forbid !"

"We are not sieves."

"Emphatically, we are not."

3

Mrs. Merrytree, left alone with active and prehensile thoughts, leapt to conviction. She knew personally every young woman under five-and-twenty who belonged to the privileged classes of the Forest of Ys. She was well aware that Mrs. Mifflin had not left the Forest since the war. The poor girl, therefore, must live in the Forest, and it might be premised, with equal logic, that she was on confidential terms with Mrs. Mifflin. From her experience of the miscalled bolder sex it was likely that

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such a young man as Major Hopetoun, having been pursued and captured, would in his turn pursue and capture a maid unlike the flaunting Azalea. She envisaged instantly a "naiad-like lily of the vale." And as instantly she beheld Loveday Thorburn. Bounding on and on with the stride of a Seeker after Truth, she assured herself that butterfly hunters in the Forest of Ys were certain, sooner or later, to meet a young lady who drew nicely in water colour, and always worked *en plein air*.

Upon the apex of these conclusions, she alighted and preened her wings.

Next day she met Mrs. Apperton, the round rosy wife of the squire of Sloden-Pauncefort. Mrs. Apperton, with marriage-ripe daughters, born and bred Foresters all of them, gazed with half-averted eyes at the flowers in Sir Godfrey Bright's parterre. If she said nothing unkind about them, she looked down her nose when their names happened to be mentioned. And the news of Azalea's engagement to Major Hopetoun was not received at Apperton Old Manor with acclamation.

After tea Mrs. Apperton showed Mrs. Merrytree her rose-garden. They strolled leisurely down privet walks, softly mossy, that exhaled a fragrance of thyme and camomile. It was inevitable that Mrs. Apperton should say presently :

"And what do you think of this approaching marriage, my dear?"

Mrs. Merrytree, who had thought of little else for twenty-four hours, replied with asperity :

"Like to like is my motto."

Mrs. Apperton smiled.

"I quite agree."

"Major Hopetoun," continued Mrs. Merrytree, "impressed me as being thoroughbred. I think we can say, without offence, that Azalea Bright is in the Hackney class."

Mrs. Apperton inclined her head.

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"She steps high," she murmured. "'Flashy' describes her not too unkindly."

"Strictly between ourselves," murmured Mrs. Merrytree, "and it is such a satisfaction to reflect that our little confidential talks never go further. . . ."

"Never," interpolated Mrs. Apperton.

"The progress of this ill-matched pair must, humanly speaking, be erratic."

"As you say, Annabella, strictly between ourselves——"

"Yes?"

"I am grieved—grieved."

And here the matter might have rested. But the imps of comedy decreed otherwise. Mrs. Merrytree asked a fateful question; the rivulet which swelled into a burn in full spate before the hay in the squire's meadows was carried.

"Have you heard any gossip about *him*?"

Mrs. Apperton pricked up her ears, and distended a sensitive nostril.

"No, no; I—I never listen to gossip."

"Nor do I."

They strolled on. Presently they sat down with nothing to disturb their solitude except the warblers. The gardeners, no longer helots of the hours, were on their way to the ale-house to slake a thirst not too inordinate after a minimum day's work at a maximum wage. But Mrs. Apperton glanced furtively about her before she whispered:

"If you have heard anything, Annabella, do, please, tell me."

The vicar's wife paused before she replied. And it was characteristic that, beneath the prickings of conscience, she moved delicately.

"I have heard something—very little, but trifles, a mere suggestion may mean so much."

"Ah! Yes, indeed!"

"I ought, perhaps, to hold my tongue."

"You are always discreet, dear Annabella. I

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need hardly assure you that anything you might care to tell me would be regarded as a sacred confidence."

Mrs. Merrytree nodded.

"I will put the case hypothetically. If—if, I say, there should be another girl."

"Another girl?"

"I have reason to believe there *is* another girl, a very sweet creature, too, whom we have, perhaps, overlooked."

"Overlooked?"

"I beg you not to ask me her name. She has been, in a sense, neglected. And, upon my word, the more I think of the child, the more I am astonished that we should have been so—so shortsighted."

"You say 'we.' Then I know the young lady?"

Mrs. Merrytree held up a protesting finger.

"No questions, please. Of course you know her. It's a fact that she has come on amazingly since the Hunt Ball. I'm inclined to think that the mischief must have been done at the Hunt Ball. He never danced with her, to be sure, and she, poor dear, sitting out most of the time, must have had opportunities for gazing at him, because he was the nicest looking young man in the room. At the ball, and certainly *after* supper, he succumbed to Azalea Bright. I can imagine what a reaction there must have been the next morning."

Mrs. Apperton opened eyes and mouth in astonishment.

"You sweep me off my feet, Annabella."

"Now if—if—for I am not absolutely sure of my facts—if this unhappy young man rushed for fresh air into the Forest, and found there a nymph——"

"I can hardly follow you. A nymph——?"

"Before the war," said Mrs. Merrytree, "the word 'nymph' suggested to me a modest English girl."

"I quite agree."

"They are still dear to memory, though lost to sight. If, I repeat, Major Hopetoun found unex-

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pectedly a pre-war maid, quietly sketching, what would he do?"

"He would hardly presume to address her, if he didn't know her."

Mrs. Merrytree laughed.

"We mustn't assume too rashly that he is a pre-war young man. In such a case, I feel justified in thinking the worst."

"The worst, Annabella?"

"I think that such a pair would fall desperately in love with each other at sight."

"But—do you suggest that this has happened?"

"I suggest nothing. I am training myself to take post-war life as I find it. From information that reached me—a—*fortuitously*"—she paused at the happy word—"I am convinced, convinced that Azalea Bright's path to the altar may not be too smooth. Let us leave it at that."

Mrs. Apperton looked perturbed. Presently, she said slowly:

"I ask no questions, Annabella, except this: ought we to leave it at that?"

4

Mrs. Apperton might have left it at that, being of a lymphatic disposition; but the same evening, before turning in, the squire of Sloden-Pauncefort said unexpectedly:

"My dear, what sort of a wedding present should we send to that much too Bright girl?"

A wife upon whom post-war economies had been imposed answered without reflection:

"We had better wait, George. There may be no marriage."

The squire was astounded; he asked questions; he exacted answers. We record neither. It is enough to say that he, in his turn, before he composed himself to sleep, was quite convinced that Major Hopetoun,

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D.S.O., had behaved after a fashion quite unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman. He was positively snorting with indignation, when his wife admonished him :

"This must go no further, George. Mrs. Merrytree spoke to me in strictest confidence, but I have never withheld confidence from *you*. The girl, of course, is Loveday Thorburn. She sketches; and she sat out many dances at the Hunt Ball."

"Am I a sieve?" growled the squire. "All the same——" He went on growling till he fell asleep.

The next day happened to be Wednesday. Both the squire and Colonel Somervell were ornaments of the Puddenhurst bench of magistrates. They lunched together at the Bell Inn. It was Colonel Somervell, however, who first mentioned Major Hopetoun, speaking handsomely of him and his family.

"Um!" ejaculated the squire. "A gay Lothario—if you ask me."

More questions, more answers, and, on this occasion, an attentive waiter was hovering about the luncheon table!

What followed may be left to the imagination. Within a week the *nouvelle* had assumed the proportions of a three volume novel. Everybody—except the persons intimately concerned—thought the "worst."

We approach, reluctantly, the castellated mansion of Sir Godfrey Bright. We dare to intrude into the bedroom of Azalea herself. We find the young lady dressing for dinner, slightly cross, because she had lost three sets of tennis, and in the hands and at the mercy of a chattering maid.

Azalea descended to the drawing-room to find herself noticeably late. Sir Godfrey scowled; Major Hopetoun smiled; Azalea presented an impassive mask to each. It was remarked afterwards that she looked flushed. Major Hopetoun, indeed, observed this, and drew some obvious inferences which, being

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a Scot, he kept to himself. He decided that Azalea "had the wind up." He had been her partner at tennis; each had played badly. Azalea, he reflected, was not a good loser, and, as a partner, when luck went against her, somewhat peevish. He ventured a mild joke after the soup which was received chillingly. Being a philosopher, he turned from the cold Azalea to the more vivacious Petunia who sat on his right. Petunia and he between them made merry, quite unconscious of the gathering storm.

As the ladies sailed out of the dining-room, Azalea whispered to Hopetoun :

"You will find me in the Italian Garden."

And she spoke menacingly !

Scots have uncanny premonitions. Hopetoun returned to his port uneasily conscious that trouble awaited him in the Italian Garden. Can we blame him for lingering over Sir Godfrey's Cockburn, 1890, sipping his coffee and old brandy, and smoking slowly the best cigar in the Forest of Ys ?

Azalea, meanwhile, pranced impatiently round a fountain, where Amorini grinned at her.

"Why have you kept me waiting like this ? "

Her voice was hard as the marble upon which she stood, cold and distant as the stars twinkling behind the cypresses.

"I'm very sorry, Azalea. As your father's guest, you know——"

"What tosh ! "

"You seem to be upset about something."

His pleasant voice irritated her. Really, she did not believe half the tale told by her maid. But half was enough to provoke expostulation. And whether the story were true or false, the lacerating fact remained that she and her fiancé had become the talk of the taverns.

"Upset ? " she echoed. "I'm furious."

"At what ? "

"You have been making an idiot of yourself

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and me. Everybody is yapping. Our own servants!"

Hopetoun dropped his cigar and shrugged his shoulders. He had shown quality in France. He showed it now. But quality is wasted on quantity.

"My dearest girl, I'm absolutely in the dark. Do, please, enlighten me."

"I know all about these butterfly hunting expeditions."

"Really? I couldn't persuade you to go with me."

"You didn't want me."

Again he shrugged his shoulders. Azalea, *his to have and to hold till death us do part*, was glaring at him. The prospect was not alluring to a man born north of the Tweed.

"Kindly tell me what I have done or left undone."

"You have been making love to that insignificant, sly little cat—Loveday Thorburn."

Irony is a dangerous weapon to use with Anglo-Saxons. Hopetoun said quietly:

"Sounds exciting. Anything else?"

"You have met her repeatedly; you have been seen kissing her, *seen!* Butterfly-catching——! I congratulate you upon adding this common or garden white to your collection."

He stared at her amazedly and laughed.

"How dare you laugh?"

"I beg your pardon, Azalea. Perhaps my imagination is even livelier than yours. I could give you half a dozen reasons which might serve to disprove this ridiculous accusation, but one will suffice: I don't know Miss Thorburn."

"You expect me to believe that?"

He replied stiffly:

"I hardly know what to expect from you. I have not met Miss Thorburn. From my point of view we can afford to laugh at a preposterous story, but it is serious for her."

"You say you have never met her. She sketches

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in the Forest. Some people are fools enough to buy her daubs."

"Sketches in the Forest?"

He repeated the words. And, suddenly, he remembered a slim girl under a big umbrella, a nice, shy little girl to whom he had spoken a fortnight before. He had asked her to indicate a short cut to Brackenford—nothing more.

"You *have* met her?"

The moon, not invariably kind to lovers, showed Azalea a troubled face.

"Yes; I may have met her."

Unconsciously his voice softened. He looked distressed. It seemed an atrocious, horrible thing that scandal should assail an innocent maid who had impressed him at the time as being unassailable by evil tongues. He said abruptly:

"This is perfectly beastly for her."

"You have spoken to her?"

"I spoke to a girl I found sketching in a glade. It may, of course, have been Miss Thorburn. She was on the small side, rather pale, with a fine texture of skin, delicate features, brown hair with a natural wave to it."

"Loveday Thorburn——! Did you ask her to take off her hat?"

"It happened to be lying on the ground."

"That is all?"

"That is all."

"I—I don't believe you."

Hopetoun remained silent. He realized the fatuity of argument with an angry woman. He realized miserably that she was not what he had deemed her to be. Each had attracted the other physically. Spiritually and mentally they were poles apart. To make such a disconcerting discovery may take years or seconds. The impulse of the wounded animal is to seek cover. Hopetoun longed to escape, to lock himself up in his room and think.

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He bowed and turned his back.

Azalea said shrilly :

"Wait !"

She held out her engagement ring.

Hopetoun took it, glanced at it, dropped it into the fountain, and disappeared behind the cypresses. The Amorini went on grinning.

5

We find him, the following day, at the Bell Inn, Puddenhurst. A night's vigil had torn scales from forget-me-not blue eyes. Your dreamer may become a rare doer when he wakes from his dreams. Wide-awake to the disqualifications of Miss Azalea Bright as a life's partner, Major Hopetoun confronted a future without her with equanimity.

Nevertheless he was sorely troubled when he thought of Loveday Thorburn. Did she know? Was she writhing helplessly in this spider's web of cumulative gossip? More—was it his duty, as a *preux chevalier*, to stifle gossip by marrying Azalea? Probably she would consent to a reconciliation if he pressed her.

He didn't want to press her—in any sense of the word.

That illuminating conviction saved the situation for him, but not for Loveday Thorburn. Sooner or later she would learn that she, poor innocent, had been the cause of a broken engagement.

Here we have a moral exigency none the less serious because fashioned out of gossamer.

To think things out thoroughly, Major Hopetoun strode into the Forest, and it is significant that an ardent lepidopterist left his butterfly net behind him.

Of course, he met Loveday. To suggest Coincidence as playing the pranks of a Goddess out of a Machine would be profanity. It may be that a distracted young man sought and found the very glade which the imps of comedy had selected as the right

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stage setting. As he approached the ancient oak, he perceived Loveday's white umbrella.

Almost—he turned and fled.

He stood still in the high green bracken beneath stainless skies. Oddly enough, his first articulate thought concerned itself with the difficulty of painting the Forest in midsummer splendour. Only a brave little girl could essay such a task. He had the keen eyesight of the practised stalker, and obviously Loveday was intent upon her work. If she knew the horrid story, could she sit quietly down under it and go on working? She might. If so, further evidence of pluck.

He smoked a cigarette.

Loveday——? The name suited her. Was she one of those rare creatures who can enjoy the passing hour? Did a day of small things suffice her? Had he ever met her before that morning when he asked the way to Brackenford? Through the tall ferns he examined her face. She reminded him of somebody. Yes—he had seen her at the Hunt Ball, the Wall Flower watching with a smile the Azaleas and Petunias and Delphineas. . . . And it had struck him, poignantly, that she looked happy, although nobody, apparently, was trying to make her so.

He wondered whether she knew. To settle this insistent question he decided to stalk her, to appear from behind the oak. If she exhibited confusion, if she blushed and stammered, only one inference was possible. And then, together, in a friendly spirit, they might make the situation less abominable by frankly discussing it.

Five minutes later he was raising his hat.

"I hope I didn't startle you."

She replied calmly:

"Oh, not at all."

She didn't know.

And yet, faintly but unmistakably, she was blushing.

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The faint blush perplexed him. It vanished as she asked demurely :

"Have you lost your way again?"

"I'm lost in a maze of thoughts. I must find my own way out of them. You are Miss Thorburn?" She nodded. "I'm Major Hopetoun."

"Yes; I know."

"You appear to like this glade?"

"I love it. I've painted it a dozen times. What I do is just pot-boiling. Trippers buy my drawings, not people who really know. Still——"

"You mean, perhaps, that you see something here which—well—which the trippers don't see?"

"Yes; I do."

"Tell me what you see."

"I—I couldn't."

"Because you don't know me?"

She remained silent.

"Knowledge of others is a queer thing," he continued. "Do any of us really know anybody?"

She quoted softly :

"Not even the tenderest heart, and next our own,
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh."

"You read Keble, Miss Thorburn?"

"Why not?"

"I may be singularly unfortunate—I'm beginning to believe I am—but I have never met a woman younger than my mother who reads Keble."

She considered this.

"You are—unfortunate."

"I am, but don't rub it in."

Shadows flitted across her clear eyes. Obviously she was startled. And he could read her thoughts easily. He, the accepted lover of a beauty and an heiress, had just declared himself to be unfortunate. She said hurriedly :

"I only meant that you were unfortunate in not knowing people who love Keble."

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"I meant that, too, and more."

They looked at each other. Then Hopetoun said slowly :

"You have heard, possibly, of my engagement?"

"Yes."

"It was broken last night."

She gasped.

"Broken last night——?"

To his utter confounding she quivered from head to foot; the pale face upturned to his became piteous. As instantly Hopetoun cursed himself for a blundering fool. She *had* heard the gossip. And he had just made up his mind to tell her of it, to assure her that good came out of evil, and then, with her, to laugh the tale out of court."

"I am frightened."

"Because—because of what I have told you?"

"Oh, no. I am terribly sorry, of course. I—I understand why you said you were lost, but it's not that. It's—it's something deeper, something too strange and bewildering for words."

"Try to find the words," he suggested.

With still trembling fingers she laid down the box of colours and clasped hands upon her working apron. Their eyes met again. Possibly the stronger will prevailed. After a long pause she said in a whisper :

"I—I dreamed it—dreamed it here in this glade—under this tree."

"You dreamed what?"

Had a note of incredulity informed his voice she might have been stricken dumb. But Celtic blood flowed in his veins. And, when she spoke, his eyes had clouded like her own.

"I dreamed that you came to me, you, a stranger, and told me you were in trouble."

"Did I tell you anything else?"

She hesitated, lost herself in the blue mists of his eyes, and went on :

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"You told me, in my dream, that she was the wrong woman for you."

A hard, grim voice broke the spell.

"She is."

Each was back to earth again. Haltingly, he attempted an explanation to which she paid scant attention. He could see that she was drifting back to her dreams. And he wondered what power stronger than a woman's curiosity lured her there. When he finished, she said mechanically :

"*She* broke it off?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because of some silly gossip."

"Gossip?"

For the third time he had to amend ill-considered conclusions. She had not heard the gossip. No matter! Let her hear it from him.

He said gravely :

"This is the strangest part of the story. The gossip, quite contemptible, not worth repeating, was about you and me."

Again she looked piteous.

"We must laugh at it. Some busybody spread the story that I had met you in the Forest and——"

"And——?"

She was sitting bolt upright, listening attentively, and the colour was creeping back into her cheeks, the light and sparkle into her eyes. No woman, certainly not Azalea, had ever gazed at him like this. His pulses thrilled, his muscles contracted.

"And made love to you," he murmured.

She said nothing. Her bosom rose and fell.

And then something in her brooding eyes provoked a whispered question :

"You didn't dream *that*?"

She smiled.

"You did? Quick! I'm on fire with excitement. Some power beyond our poor selves has saved me

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from perdition. I must know everything—*everything*. Did I kiss you in your dream? I am accused by Dame Gossip of kissing you. Did I?"

"Yes."

"Ah! The end of the dream must have been a sort of nightmare. I—I, a stranger, as you say, appear out of nowhere, and I have the impudence to talk about myself, and then I kiss you. What did you do?"

Only a lover could have heard her reply.

"You mustn't ask me."

"Did *you* kiss me?"

He had pressed the point too far. Her eyes fell from his; white lids hid them, but he saw that her fingers were trembling. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"You saw me at the Hunt Ball?"

She nodded.

"And I saw you. But I didn't dream of you. I hate myself because I didn't. All the same, out of sight, back of memory, in a tiny shrine of its own, was your sweet face."

She looked up at him.

"From now on," he continued, "your face will remain with me. I shall carry it to the end. You may think me an impulsive sort of ass. I am. I rushed into an engagement with the wrong woman, and, maybe, I had to serve apprentice to her, so that next time I should be wiser. I feel wiser at this minute than I ever felt before. Wiser and—humbler. So I kissed you in the dream life——! Many times? Stand up! Look me square in the eyes, Loveday. Did I kiss you and go on kissing you?"

Could a shy maid answer such a question?

She stood up. Her lips parted deliciously. No sound came from them.

He closed them with his own.

QUALITY

I

BEFORE the war, Habakkuk Mucklow acted as "beater" to old Captain Davenant, and none knew the north-west part of the Forest of Ys better than he. Occasionally, even now, when physical powers were waning, "Uncle" would take the field with the guest of some licensee who had paid an extra ten pounds for the privilege of giving visitors rough shooting. Uncle, somehow, seemed to know a few hours earlier than anybody else when the woodcock and snipe came in.

He took such information to Ockley House upon a sharp November's evening, when frost had stopped hunting. He knew that the squire's son was at home; and the squire, with little shooting of his own, was a licensee who paid the extra ten pounds, although he grumbled that he couldn't afford it.

Uncle noted, as he walked briskly through the village, that cottages and farm buildings were sadly out of repair. Indeed, throughout the Forest, Ockley was held to be an object-lesson of how not to administer a small property. The squire, a "die-hard," lived in a corner of his big house, cruelly impoverished by mortgages and increased taxation.

George Tarrant, the squire's son, had been accepted before the war as a chip of a decaying old block. He seemed to be perfectly content with life, if you can call it that, as he found it at Ockley. Hard campaigning transformed the boy into a man. More, laid low by a bad wound, he had leisure, possibly, to reflect upon a problematical future.

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Sound again in wind and limb, he had sworn to make good, although he was aware that his brains were not of the best. Demobbed soon after the armistice, unable to find the right billet in England, he had gone to Western Canada, where his knowledge of horses and cattle, picked up at haphazard at Ockley, found a market.

He had come home for a three months' holiday.

George welcomed Uncle affectionately, and filled a tankard for him.

"Woodcock be in," said Uncle, "an' tired too, pore li'l beasties. If you be ready, Master Garge, for a day's sport to-morrer, I can show 'ee where the birds bide."

"You bet!" said George heartily.

Arrangements were soon made. Ockley lies within a couple of miles of Hernshaw Parva. The thorns in the bottoms and bogs lying south of Queen's Jalland plain are beloved by the woodcock. It was likely, too, that duck would be driven south by the hard weather.

George agreed to meet Uncle at ten the next morning. Uncle promised to bring his spaniel, quite as artful as his master, and more active.

Several woodcock and a brace of mallard were bagged before luncheon.

After luncheon, to the surprise of Uncle, George seemed disinclined to leave the snug fire made by Uncle in a hollow of the hill, near a badger's earth. Badgers and foxes detest cold as much as we do.

Uncle dropped a timely hint.

"'Tis dark nigh on to four, Master Garge."

"I know. Fill your pipe again, Uncle, with my baccy. I want to talk to you. I'm—I'm in a hole, and it isn't as cosy as this one."

Uncle expanded. He looked and felt—the Sage. He had helped "quality" before. As a rule they were not ungrateful. He nodded sagaciously as George went on:

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"I believe, Uncle, that you can mind other folks' business better than you can your own."

"My ole Jane says so," admitted Uncle cheerfully.

"I've had a mix-up with the squire, old chap."

"Ah-h-h! A masterful man, too."

"Dead set in stupid old ways."

"Same as I be."

"All you Foresters," continued the young man crossly, "are covered with moss. That's a disability."

"I begs your pardon——?"

"Moss indicates decay. I'll get down to brass tacks, Uncle, because I want your help. I'm planning to take a little wife back with me to Canada."

"Lard love 'ee, Master Garge. I'll lay a crown you found her at Apperton Old Manor."

"No; I didn't. Mum's the word?" Uncle nodded. "I found her at Queen's Jalland."

Uncle expressed approval.

"Squire's son an' squire's darter."

"Just so. But Colonel Jalland is as obstinate and as moss-encrusted as my father. Who are the Jallands? Who are the Tarrants—I ask you?"

"Quality," said Uncle emphatically.

"What d'ye mean by quality?"

Uncle dealt faithfully with the scornful question.

"You be quality—for why? 'Cause your fathers an' granfers were herealong afore 'ee. I has no use for furriners an' carpet-baggers. Profiteers bain't quality. I reckons there was a Tarrant o' Ockley and a Jalland o' Queen's Jalland in Noah's Ark."

George said tartly:

"Then they went into it as a pair of mules."

Uncle, an upholder of the Fifth Commandment, was shocked.

"They was quality then as now," he affirmed.

"I mean to marry Mercy Jalland, and she means to marry me."

"And you has my blessin' on it, Master Garge."

Quality

I larned 'ee to tell the slot of a hind from a stag, and the difference 'twixt the notes of a thrush an' a storm-thrush. I be fair tickled to death over this."

"Thanks, old chap. The colonel and my father are furious."

"For why?"

"Simply because there isn't enough money on either side to start us here in the Forest according to their notions. Luckily, I inherited a bit from my mother, enough to keep us in Canada, not in Melshire. We don't want to live in Melshire. That cuts no ice with them. I may make enough money in Canada so that, some day, I shall be able to live decently at Ockley. That cuts no ice either. It sounds incredible to-day, Uncle, but it's another frozen fact that my father, who didn't consult me about being my father, thinks that he has the right to pick a mate for me. Colonel Jalland entertains similar misconceptions about his daughter."

"Dear! Dear!" muttered Uncle.

"These two fossils sit together on the Puddenhurst Bench; they think alike upon every subject that is dead and buried; to listen to 'em you'd think that they *had* been in the ark. Up-to-date talk and argument is wasted on 'em."

"But they be quality," maintained Uncle.

"They have brought a lot of pressure to bear on us," continued George. "In their high-and-mighty way they've had the best of it so far."

"Ah-h-h!"

"You wouldn't believe it, but my father refuses to meet Miss Jalland. The colonel refuses to meet me. My father, as you know, has shut himself up. He hasn't seen Mercy Jalland for seven years. He wouldn't know her if he did see her. She can jolly well hold her own with him. In his bones he funks seeing her. Well, they have exacted a sort of promise from us. We were fools to give it, but we did. We promised to mark time, because, mind you, we

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thought that time would be on our side. Time doesn't exist for the Tarrants and the Jallands. Finally, it's come to this: I can't meet my little girl except on the sly."

"'Tis a fair way for true lovers to meet," murmured Uncle. "I mind me——"

"It's hateful. It means lying, deceitfulness, and—if we're caught—ructions."

"Let off steam, Master Garge, at they woodcocks."

"Not yet. I can't write to her; she can't write to me. Father and Colonel Jalland overhaul the letters every morning."

"Well, I never!"

"Rank tyranny! This has gone on for a month. Lady Mary Jalland has my Mercy at her mercy. Are we living in the twentieth century?"

"I sometimes wishes we wasn't," said Uncle.

"Will you help us, Uncle?"

"Whatever can the likes o' me do, Master Garge?"

"You can play postman. That brain wave came to me the moment I set eyes on you. You're here, there, and everywhere."

"Pickin' up chicken feed—yes."

"This may mean more than chicken feed."

Uncle assumed a dignity that became him well.

"I'll sarve 'ee, Master Garge, as best I can wi'out pay. You knows that."

George held out his hand.

"I shall bag the next woodcock," he said.

He did.

Before the pair parted, George entrusted Uncle with a letter for Miss Mercy Jalland, and a brace of woodcock for the colonel. When delivering the woodcock, Uncle undertook to devise some means or

Quality

other of slipping the letter into Mercy's hand. If he failed, he promised to try again on the morrow. The essence of the understanding between George and Uncle lay in the pledge that there should be no intermediaries.

Uncle went his way cheerfully. Queen's Jalland is situate between Ockley and Nether-Applewhite, where Uncle lived. Any man taking a brace of woodcock to the colonel might reckon on a tankard of ale and half a crown.

Apart from these material considerations it was a job after Uncle's heart. The ripe humanity of the old fellow bubbled to his lips in song as he strode away from Ockley. He loved a lover. At the same time he was whimsically aware that something could be said for the Roman fathers, whose point of view he could appreciate. As a Forester, Canada seemed to be back of beyond. He would hate to see a son or a daughter of his "rampagin' off" to "furrin'" parts.

The job presented no difficulties at first. Sanguine anticipations were realized. The colonel was at home. He accepted the woodcock graciously, sent for a jug of ale, and smoked a pipe as he listened to Uncle's slightly over-coloured description of the day's sport. From the colonel's breezy manner, Uncle inferred that the woodcock were accepted as an assurance of no ill will between two ancient families, although a closer alliance might be deemed by authority inexpedient.

The colonel spoke handsomely of young George.

"Nice boy! Good boy! A fair shot, Uncle, and a fine horseman!"

"That he be."

A beater of bushes, forest-wise in all that pertained to venery, had thought out, you may be sure, his dispositions. Before delivering the woodcock, Uncle removed the four tiny feathers which are used as brushes in the painter's trade for laying stripes

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upon carriage wheels. Miss Jalland, as he knew, painted in oil and water-colour, having, indeed, little else to engross her energies.

Uncle showed the feathers to the colonel.

"I thought, maybe, Miss Mercy might find a use for 'em."

"And a very kindly thought, too. You shall have the pleasure of giving them to my dear girl yourself."

"Quality," murmured Uncle to himself. A profiteer or a carpet-bagger would have taken the feathers with a curt word of thanks, and then, probably, would have forgotten all about them.

The colonel sent for Mercy.

She tripped into the servants' hall. Uncle rose to receive the little lady. He marked with approval sparkling eyes and pink cheeks.

Quality——! From ears to fetlocks.

Presenting the feathers, and expatiating upon their uses, Uncle went on to describe for the second time the day's sport. The colonel could have too much of a good thing, but, being quality, he curbed an impulse to snub a garrulous old man. He slipped half a crown into Uncle's often-greased palm and left the hall.

Uncle delivered the letter. Mercy read it there and then. After reading it she blushed delightfully. In less time than it takes a duck to shake its tail twice she had arranged to meet Uncle on the morrow and hand him the answer.

Uncle whistled gaily as he crossed the plain.

Next day the imps of comedy took a hand in the distracting game.

Uncle received a note and promised to deliver it at once. But when he reached the stable yard at Ockley, a servant told him that father and son had gone to Puddenhurst and would not return till night-fall. Uncle's face fell. That afternoon he was beginning a belated job of fancy thatching many

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miles away. He couldn't leave Mercy's note with a servant, because, for one thing, it wasn't addressed.

He scratched his head as he left the stable yard. Passing the village post-office, inspiration descended on him. He entered, and asked for an envelope and a stamp. He thrust the note into the envelope, stamped it, and addressed it to George Tarrant, Esq.

He forgot that the squire's name was George. He thought of him and spoke of him habitually as the squire.

Cleverer men have made worse blunders.

It was now eleven. At noon the letters were collected. The second post was delivered at four.

Uncle went home, chuckling to himself. Master George would find something to warm the cockles of his heart when he got back from Puddenhurst.

3

Hard up though he was, the Squire of Ockley loved a sound glass of wine, particularly port. He had shared a decanter with his son after dinner that same evening, and he seemed to enjoy it more than usual. Vintage port inspires confidence; it loosens tongues; it rejuvenates.

As much can be affirmed concerning old brandy.

The squire sipped his old brandy.

"I've been bucked up to-night, my boy."

"Have you, dad?"

"Yes, yes, there's life in the old hound. George, my lad, your father is not out of the hunt yet. I've half a mind to tell you something."

"Do."

"I suppose I look younger than my years. Still on the sunny side of sixty—eh?"

"You don't look fifty."

"I feel five-and-twenty. Of course, I've taken care of myself, what?"

George agreed. His sire had not taken care of

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much else, he reflected. The squire continued complacently :

"Would you fall off your chair if I told you that your old dad has made a conquest?"

"Why not?" George added indiscreetly : "The women, b' Jove, are wide awake to the knowledge that men aren't exactly a glut on the market."

"Just so. When we got back from Puddenhurst I opened a letter addressed to me in an obviously disguised hand. Inside was an assignation."

The unsuspecting George grinned. It occurred to him that love, even senile love, softens hard tissues and casts a glamour. He glanced at his sire. Nothing senile about him. Tall, thin, distinguished in appearance, the squire was still young enough to achieve attachment if not detachment.

"Let's hear all about it," George said pleasantly.

The squire pulled out the envelope addressed by Uncle and pushed it across the table.

"Do you recognize that handwriting?"

"No," said George, quite truthfully.

"Do you recognize this? I thought at first it might be intended for you."

The squire pulled a sheet of pale grey notepaper from the pocket of his dinner-jacket. George moved uneasily. He had seen similar notepaper before. He guessed that a blunder had been perpetrated by Uncle. Having pledged himself to mark time, he was, perhaps, justified in doing it now. He glanced at the handwriting and said indifferently :

"I believe I have seen that fist before."

"Read it, my boy."

George read as follows :

"Miss Muffit presents her compliments to Mr. Tarrant and would like to meet him as soon as possible. She claims the right to take the initiative in a matter that concerns her happiness. Miss Muffit feels that she has hidden her real self from

Quality

Mr. Tarrant. She believes, perhaps wrongly, that she knows him better than he knows her. If Mr. Tarrant wishes to make the better acquaintance of Miss Muffit, let him meet her to-morrow, at three, in the gorse to the left of the Green Pond on Hershaw Parva Plain."

George handed back the letter without comment. In a new country a man learns to think first and act afterwards. Reversing these processes many a tenderfoot has been laid low.

"Is some little baggage pullin' my leg?" asked the squire.

"No, dad. The letter appears to me to be sincere. Miss Muffit, whoever she may be, evidently wants to make your better acquaintance."

This again was true. George felt rather pleased with himself. He added, smilingly :

"If you keep this assignation, I'll bet you a box of cigars that Miss Muffit weighs in."

He burst out laughing. The squire glowered at him.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I was thinking," said George, "that it would be a rummy go if you and I fell in love at the same time."

"Stranger things have happened," retorted the squire. "I'm not in love, nor likely to be, but there is nothing ridiculous about the possibility."

"Nothing," assented George.

"I know everybody about here, my boy."

"Not you," said his son. "You shoot by yourself; you don't hunt; you don't entertain. The Forest is full of jolly girls whom you don't know."

"True enough," sighed the squire. "Bit of a hermit, what? Yes, yes; a dull life, a dull life. This little affair puts a dash of sparkle into it."

"It does, dad."

"I shall meet Miss Muffit," said the squire.

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4

George decided to let his father meet Mercy, but Mercy must be warned first. If he arrived at the Green Pond at a quarter to three, and then walked leisurely towards Queen's Jalland over more or less open country, he must meet Mercy. Fate had thrust into his hands a weapon. Mercy, bless her! would capture the squire in five minutes. He had refused to meet her. Of his own free will he was going to meet her.

We follow George, next day, to the Green Pond and elsewhere. He had keen eyesight, and he used it after leaving the pond, but Mercy simply was not. He came to the conclusion that something had prevented her keeping the tryst. That in itself was of little importance, but the effect on his sire might be disastrous. Befeooled by one of the sex he would rail against all.

George pushed on till he found himself close to Queen's Jalland. In another minute he would have scurried back home. But the imps of comedy willed otherwise. These imps had arranged for the fun of the thing that Mercy Jalland should be lunching at Hernshaw Parva upon the other side of the Green Pond. After luncheon she intended to keep her tryst. If she arrived home an hour later than usual no questions would be asked. In fine, as George was striding away from the pond in a northerly direction, Mercy was approaching it from the south.

"How do you do, George?"

Lady Mary Jalland held out her hand, faintly smiling. The wife of a profiteer might have found the situation trying, but Lady Mary was equal to it. Being a strict Anglican, upheld even in post-war times by a devout faith in Omnipotence, she may have accepted resignedly George's presence in the village. Too fond, possibly, of trying to interpret the inscrutable decrees of Providence, she may also have for-

Quality

tified herself with the conviction that she and George were "intended" to meet.

Perhaps they were.

"I'm very well, thank you, Lady Mary."

Slight defiance informed his tone, but he had to admit that Mercy was her mother's daughter, inheriting her charm of manner and her delicate features. She had inherited also that form of courage which deals fearlessly with what is disagreeable.

"I'm glad of the opportunity of a word with you."

"Certainly," said George.

"Your dear father sent us some woodcock yesterday."

"I sent them, Lady Mary."

"Then I am doubly glad of the opportunity of thanking you in person. We accepted them as a peace-offering. It would be too absurd for our families to become estranged merely because you two young people have lost your heads."

"We have found them, Lady Mary."

She walked beside him. It was too cold to stand still. The snap in the frosty air may have lent itself to the duologue. George continued politely:

"What have you and the colonel against me, Lady Mary?"

"What has your father against our Mercy?"

"I quite understand," said George. "The two questions have one answer—nothing. There is nothing against either of us. We are young and strong, and of the same social position, such as it is."

"You sneer at social position?"

"Not I. Will you allow me to state your objections, which are also my father's, to a marriage between Mercy and me?"

Lady Mary was taken aback. She replied, however, with dignity:

"If it serves any good purpose, George."

"It comes to this," said George warmly. "The Tarrants and the Jallands are nearly played out. We

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live in houses too big for us, under-staffed; upon small properties reverting helplessly to type."

"Yes; our rhododendrons are reverting to Ponticum."

"So are ours. Everything is reverting, if not to Ponticum, to a place that I will not shock you by mentioning."

"Thank you, George."

"My old dad would like me to marry Delphinea Bright" (Sir Godfrey Bright, a carpet-bagger, had named all his daughters after flowers, out of which he had made a large fortune). "The colonel would gladly hand over Mercy to Delphinea's brother, who is a bit of a bounder."

"I grasp your meaning, George. Money is needed sadly at Queen's Jalland and Ockley. Still, one may pay too bright a price for it. Your father and the colonel are agreed about one thing: two young people belonging to families reverting to Ponticum ought to be kept apart. How do you propose to support Mercy if—if you married her?"

"Support! What a word! Is Mercy a cripple? I have asked her to share my life in Canada. It's a grand life, a free life. I ask her to work with me towards a definite end."

"What end?"

"Ockley. Ockley as it ought to be. If my father died to-morrow it would have to be sold. And, by heaven! I'd sooner see it sold to Sir Godfrey Bright, who would pull down and rebuild our cottages, than live in it myself as it is to-day. Why do I pick Mercy? Because she feels just as I do about this. It's bred in her. She would work and fight with me, shoulder to shoulder, because she wants what I want. She's not afraid of a fight. That's bred in her, too. I found myself in the trenches, Lady Mary, and Mercy found herself in a V.A.D. kit."

Lady Mary remained silent.

Quality

"Before the war," went on George, with increasing vehemence, "you would have been wise to try to keep us apart, because we were just a couple of marionettes, dancing to the tune that killed the old cow. To-day, I'm a man, and Mercy is a woman. You can't keep us apart."

"Can't?"

"Can't, Lady Mary. Out of respect for you and father we have stood hitched, as they say out West, hitched to a rotten rail. We are fed up with standing—*hitched*."

Perhaps he intended to say no more. At that moment he saw Colonel Jalland approaching. What George had said could not be repeated except by Lady Mary. From his knowledge of her she would repeat it—*verbatim*.

He lifted his cap, bowed, and turned his back upon the most astonished lady in the Forest of Ys.

5

Mercy Jalland reached the gorse, near the Green Pond, about a quarter of an hour after George had left it. She might have had a glimpse of him topping a hill had she been looking in the right direction. Instead, she kept her eyes upon the track that led to Ockley. In making this tryst with her lover she was disobeying the colonel and Lady Mary. These autocrats had "wangled" a sort of pledge from Mercy that she would not meet George. Driven to break that pledge she felt angry with her parents and angry with herself, because she detested lies and deceit.

Mercy's clear eyes softened as she saw what she took to be George in the far distance. She, too, had keen eyesight. It struck her that George was not exactly hurrying. He did not carry a high head. She could remember, before the war, when she was a

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girl of sixteen, that George's "slouch" was characteristic of a young man regarded by most of his acquaintances as an agreeable slacker.

Suddenly she gasped.

It was not George, but his father.

Naturally, she leapt to the wrong conclusion. She knew that the squire had refused to meet her. She knew also that George wished his father to meet her. She knew, lastly, that George, like herself, was under this ridiculous pledge not to meet her. What had happened? She felt sure that George had asked his father to release him from a pledge which should never have been exacted or given. She could hear the squire saying: "No, no. Dammy! I'll go myself. I'll deal with her."

For a minute she contemplated flight. She could see the squire, but he could not see Mercy because she stood in the gorse, which afforded shelter from a bitter wind.

Fighting instincts stirred within her. Had Jallands run away at Blenheim, Waterloo and Inkerman?

"I must face him," she thought. "I—I must fight him."

Resolutely she stepped forward to meet and greet him.

The squire saw a charming little figure, just right in his opinion from her rough Tam-o'-Shanter to her boots.

He raised his hat with something of a flourish; he smiled at her.

"You are Miss Muffit?"

"I am."

He took her hand and pressed it.

"It is not so cold in the gorse," said Mercy.

The fact that the squire addressed her by a name never used except by George confirmed her conviction that the squire had seen her letter.

They found a cosy spot and sat down. The squire,

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a bit rusty at philandering, and accustomed, before the war, to ride fast at his fences, said genially :

"Now, my dear young lady, may I ask you to tell me who you are?"

Mercy nearly betrayed her amazement. Her cheeks, reddened by the wind, displayed a deeper damask that escaped the squire's eye.

"You don't know who I am?"

"I don't. From your letter, a delicious little letter, a—a most alluring little letter, I divined that you knew me. I confess that I expected to meet somebody whom I knew."

War-sharpened wits served well an astounded maiden. She guessed that her letter to George had fallen, by mistake, into the squire's hands. Apparently, with an egotism that provoked an inward smile, this elderly spider had accepted it as an invitation to sit beside Miss Muffit in November!

A trickle of laughter escaped her.

"Think of me," she suggested, "as Miss—Nobody."

The squire was content to leave it at that for a moment or two. Conscious, perhaps, that Miss Muffit was outsparring him, he said lightly :

"You force me to think of you as Somebody. You have an air——! However——! I ask no questions yet. Joking apart, you must have written that little letter because you wished to make my acquaintance."

"I did. I—I do."

"That is very flattering."

"Is it? I hate flattery. Don't, please, pay me compliments. I hate compliments. Shall I try to tell you what sort of a girl I am?"

"You can't be too autobiographical for me, my dear."

He told himself that he was puzzled—and charmed. The squire, to do him justice, abhorred vulgarity. He had walked to this tryst leisurely,

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with bent head, because he was anticipating disappointment. He listened to a soft voice with unmistakable inflections. Miss Muffit, he decided, possessed what he ranked as the highest attribute in women and horses—quality.

“I am very independent, although my own people have not a notion of it. I think that every woman has a right to—to fight for her own hand, if—if she wants to give it to the right man.”

Her slight hesitations delighted the squire. Call him an old fool, if you like, but let those without vanity fling stones at him. Invariably, we believe what we want to believe, although our beliefs may seem to others incredible. As he remained silent, she asked him shyly :

“Do you agree with me?”

He stared at her. Even he, the dyed-in-the-wool reactionary, had to admit exceptions to all rules. Of the modern young woman he knew nothing, except what he had gleaned from newspaper articles. He had shut himself up in a corner of his house, partly because he was so impoverished, partly also because he detested changes wrought by the war. None-the-less, even before the unutterable cataclysm, he had met women who, by sheer force of personality, soared above the disabilities of their sex. He said cautiously :

“I agree that you, perhaps, are exceptional.”

She beamed at him, hearing only the pleasant voice of George’s father, too excited in pleading her own cause to realize what construction might be placed on her actual words.

“I don’t think I am, really. Initiative has been forced upon so many of us. We have been up against realities. Perhaps we are toughened.” He shook his head emphatically. She felt encouraged to go on : “We do things that shock our elders and betters.”

“Betters? Um !”

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He ventured to take her hand and hold it.

"We can't have it both ways, can we? My mother, for instance, has lived in lavender. She's a sweet woman."

"I'm sure she is."

"But what I am doing, to-day, would shock her inexpressibly. I am sure I have shocked you. Tell me, haven't I?"

"You haven't—yet."

"Thanks for the warning. I hate shocking people. Possibly, the preconceived idea that I have of you is—is utterly wrong."

"Tell me your preconceived idea of me."

"You won't be cross?"

He replied gallantly:

"With you—impossible."

She softened what was coming artlessly. The most finished coquette could have essayed no happier gambit.

"I have been ever so sorry for you."

The squire, with no contempt for cliché, thought to himself that pity is ever of kin to love.

She continued gently:

"You live such a lonely life."

"I do—I do. Talking with you, my dear, brings that home to me quite poignantly."

"It is not surprising that you have grown self-centred, is it?"

She met his glance. The eyes lifted to his were full of sympathy and tenderness, so full that he asked himself what he had ever done to inspire such sensibility in so sweet a creature.

"I *am* self-centred," he admitted.

"You—you consider nobody but yourself."

He said stiffly:

"Pardon me, I have a son."

"I know. But surely you don't consider his happiness before your own?"

He blinked at her. Light should have come to

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him. It didn't, because light blinds cave-dwellers. But, with many faults, he was honest.

"Why should I?"

"Ah! You admit that you don't. So, you see, my preconceived notion of you was not altogether mistaken."

He digested this in silence. She gently withdrew her hand.

"What has my son to do with us?" he asked heavily.

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"I—I couldn't love a man who was unkind to his only son."

"Bless my soul! Unkind? Look here, Miss Muffit, I dare say you have heard some gossip about my boy and that Jalland girl. I dare say you know them."

"I do."

"That foolish affair had to be nipped."

"Why?"

"Simply because he is a Tarrant and she is a Jalland. I don't know the girl. I haven't seen her since she wore pig-tails. I don't want to know her. Cut them both out of this. From your letter, from what you said, so innocently, just now, I have to believe that you, you dear little thing, want to love *me*."

The emphasis on the personal pronoun did him credit.

"Yes; I do. You—you are making it difficult."

"Am I? Tell me how to make it easy."

"Let your son marry the woman he loves. He means to do it anyway."

"What?"

"From my knowledge of him and her they will marry without the consent of their parents, if it is cruelly withheld."

The squire winced, as he replied gruffly :

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"So much the worse for them."

"And for you."

"Hay——?"

"I—I——" her voice quavered. "I should hate you."

The squire wriggled, impaled upon a hook of his own sharpening. His wits were hopelessly befogged. And yet the hatred of this small creature disconcerted him. Was she imposing terms? Was she offering him love on conditions? He said hastily:

"If—I say 'if'—if I gave way out of the warm regard you have—er—inspired in me, a regard which I'm incapable at the moment of—er—measuring——"

"Yes?"

"Colonel Jalland would never budge from his position."

"You are mistaken; he would."

"How on earth do you know?"

"He is much fonder of his daughter than you are of your son. Wait! You forced him to entrench himself in what you call his position. You admit, I suppose, that the Jallands are as good as the Tarrants?"

"Of course I do."

"Did you expect Colonel Jalland to come to you, hat in hand, to—to ask you to climb down your prehistoric pole?"

"Prehistoric pole——?"

"That's what it is. Having climbed up your pole, Colonel Jalland had to climb up his. The whole Forest is laughing at you both, and you don't know it."

Perspiration started on the squire's brow. He tried to envisage two Injustices of the Peace at the top of two poles, gibbeted as laughing stocks for the Forest of Ys. He had been prepared for anything except—ridicule.

He wiped his brow with a gay bandana.

A soft, beguiling voice banished misgivings:

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"I did so want to love you."

The squire jumped up. So did Mercy.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Mercy Jalland."

The squire scowled at her fiercely. He had been had—shamefully. This little baggage, not up to his shoulder, had worked her wicked will on him.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she asked.

The squire kissed her.

.

At the wedding, and afterwards, Uncle drank the health of bride and groom.

"I knowed," he was overheard to say, "wi' my gert, understandin' mind, that quality be quality, an' like mates wi' like. By God A'mighty's grace, I bringed 'em all together; yes, I did."

THE HERMIT'S DAUGHTER

I

IT occurred sometimes to Mary—in her less robust moments—that she was not too fortunate in the possession of relations, although she might congratulate herself upon her selection of an adorable mother. And when Mrs. Ribbleswade died, Mary, then fourteen and young for her years, shared the conviction of her nurse, fortified by the perusal of certain books now never read, that her mother was too good for this wicked world, and, accordingly, had been translated to Heaven. Her father found consolation in his library, where he buried himself. Mary became the sole charge of a competent but old-fashioned governess. When she was seventeen the Great War broke out. During four years Mary was actively employed as universal provider to her father. After the armistice, Mr. Ribbleswade bought a tiny place in the Forest of Ys, not far from Puddenhurst, where he hoped that his neighbours would leave him in peace. They did. Within six months he became known as The Hermit. Mary, who had never come “out,” remained more or less “in.” Foresters, like the Mottisfonts and Sluflters, said to each other: “Who is this Mr. Ribbleswade?” Finally, somebody not entirely covered with moss replied: “He’s an eminent biologist.” But the word explained nothing. Indeed, old Mrs. Sluflter confounded it with bigamist, and shook her head sadly when Mr. Ribbleswade was mentioned at tea parties. Also, he was not a churchman. Few of the elect called upon him, and some of their cards—unpardonable offence!—were not returned.

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Mr. Ribbleswade, far from the madding crowd, pursued the even tenor of his way. Mary, as typist and housekeeper, allowed no complaints to leak from her lips. A few neighbours were "kind" to her. Mary resented pity. Possibly she was astonished to discover that an eminent biologist with an international reputation was deemed of less account in the Forest of Ys than any squireen who owned a fox cover. Anyway, she kept such astonishment to herself.

We come now, reverentially, to the supreme social function—the Hunt Ball, which takes place, as everybody knows, at Puddenhurst in the spring of the year, when "thrusters" from the "shires" get an extra month's hunting in April of fox and buck. Amongst them, in pre-war days, had been numbered General Sefton, then an ex-major of cavalry, who happened to be the brother of the late Mrs. Ribbleswade. Uncle Tony, probably, had extolled the Forest of Ys to his brother-in-law, although they met but seldom. He hardly realized till he saw Mary that he possessed a pretty niece. He was amazed to note that her hair was "up," although her skirts perceptibly had not come down.

"Of course," he said, "you are going to the ball."

Mary had made no such plan and said so. Whereupon Uncle Tony, gallantly confronting his avuncular responsibilities, exclaimed genially:

"I shall take you, my dear. A smart frock and a ticket will be my affair. Send to London for your frock."

"Thank you ever so much, Uncle Tony. This is kind of you."

The general smiled and kissed her, not feeling quite happy. Being a bachelor, and living in the Midlands, he had not concerned himself heretofore about Mary. But he had loved his sister dearly. Between him and the biologist there was little in common save a liking for vintage port. When they

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cracked a bottle together, the general observed casually :

"Mary is a dear little girl, very like her mother—the ministering angel, what?"

The biologist blinked at the soldier, nodding majestically :

"A good girl, thank God! And a great help to me, Tony."

"So I see. Does anybody help her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

The general muttered testily :

"Who gives Mary a good time?"

The biologist answered as testily :

"What d'y'e mean, Tony? Mary is mistress of this comfortable house. She is perfectly happy and contented. Bless my soul! You have only to look at her face to see that."

"Um!" replied the general pensively. "Any young men buzzin' about her?"

"Not that I know of."

Uncle Tony sipped his port, slightly frowning, as he stared at the domed forehead opposite to him. In the distance he could hear Mary playing the piano with a soft touch that reminded him of his sister. He reflected: "The ways of Providence are inscrutable. The mother is taken, and this queer, self-centred father is left. Really, it's time I butted in." Aloud, he said pleasantly: "I am taking Mary to the Hunt Ball."

"That is very kind of you, Tony."

So Mary said.

Long before supper, Uncle Tony realized that things had changed since his time. No up-to-date maiden went to a ball without a dancing partner. Mary's mother, had she been alive, would probably have seen to it that this necessary appendage was provided. To make matters more grievous, uncle and niece arrived late, simply because Uncle Tony had lingered over his port and the cigar that fol-

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lowed. Being a good fellow his conscience pricked him. Very gallantly, he took the floor with Mary, pausing frequently, hoping that younger men would come up and ask Mary for dances. But they didn't. Sitting out with Mary, and still hopeful, he put to her this natural question :

"Do you know many young men, my dear?"

Mary shook her head, adding artlessly : "Don't worry, uncle. You see, you will be able to get to bed reasonably early."

Uncle Tony was quite unprepared for this deadly thrust. Nor could he envisage Mary as a wall-flower. She was no beauty, to be sure, but pretty enough, and smartly turned out. He heard her pleasant voice, as she continued :

"You see people, nowadays, make up big parties. I expect the few boys I do know are booked up. How well you dance, uncle!"

Uncle Tony's face became pink as his coat with suppressed exasperation. Apparently the child was counting on him. She glanced at him with appealing confidence; she expected him, a veteran, to give her a good time. He had provided the frock and the tickets. In the name of the Sphinx could any uncle be asked to do more?

He glanced anxiously about him. He knew one or two men present of his own well-matured vintage, fellows who had come down to the Forest of Ys for the April hunting. From their rosy faces, he turned to the girl at his side. She was like her mother. How well he remembered the dances long ago, when he and his sister had gone out together. Mary's mother had not been a wall-flower. Why had she married Mary's father—confound him! Nevertheless, in spite of an ever-increasing irritation, he felt pleased because the child had praised his dancing. He said :

"My dancing is of the good old 'eighties. I got giddy just now. That's why I stopped so often, my dear."

The Hermit's Daughter

A young man approached, not cut to a pattern approved by Uncle Tony.

"Can you spare me a dance?"

Mary, with a faintly derisive smile, held out a virgin card upon which the young man scribbled his initials.

"Who is he?" asked Uncle Tony, as the youth vanished.

"Justin Wakefield. He—he writes."

Uncle Tony grunted.

"Rides, does he? I hav'n't noticed him."

"I said—writes."

"Um! I dare say. Are you dancing the next dance with him?"

"Yes."

Presently, Mr. Wakefield bore her away. Uncle Tony, left alone, stared at the crowd. Across the room, leaning against the wall, stood an old friend of his, one of the most famous horsemen in the kingdom. Uncle Tony joined him.

"What are you doin' here, Tony?"

"I've brought a niece."

"Good old Tony!"

"I've brought the child, but, dammy, she doesn't know any young men. Do you?"

The friend, like himself, was a visitor to the Forest of Ys. As an ex-Master of Hounds he had come to the Hunt Ball from a sense of duty, and hoped to slip away immediately after supper. However, he led Uncle Tony across the room and presented him to a sprightly dowager wearing a tiara. He explained matters curtly:

"My old pal has a niece here. You must ginger things up for her."

Then he retreated. The lady laughed.

"Can you be more explicit?" she asked Uncle Tony. "Please point out your niece to me."

Uncle Tony did so. The lady, who was not a visitor, made a gesture.

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"The Hermit's daughter."

"Yes. Hermits oughtn't to have daughters," he growled.

"I'll do what I can, but, frankly, it's rather late. I know your niece slightly. Her father positively refuses to know *us*."

Uncle Tony understood that the "*us*" included all the important people in the Forest of Ys. He was not surprised.

"Is this her first dance?"

"It is."

"Oh, dear! No wonder you look so unhappy. But—*she* doesn't."

"Not yet," replied Uncle Tony.

"Bring her up to me after this dance."

"You are very kind. Meanwhile, I'll draw another cover."

He wandered round the room. Suddenly, his eyes brightened. Near the door was lounging a young man in a Quorn coat. Uncle Tony greeted him as if he were a long-lost son.

"My dear Dick, I'm delighted to see you. Why aren't you dancing?"

"Well, sir, I'm a carpet-bagger. I don't know these Foresters."

"Have a cigarette."

They withdrew to the ante-room, and found a couple of easy chairs. Uncle Tony wasted no precious minutes. He knew that Dick Kenyon was a thruster with hounds, and, judging by outward appearances, likely to hold his own in a ball-room. He began confidentially:

"Can you dance, my boy?"

"Can I dance? I was the champion dancer of the world, sir. And when I won the championship I danced without stopping for twenty-seven hours, three minutes and thirteen seconds. Towards the end, during the last two hours, I noticed that my partner, a de'vlish pretty girl, was a bit limp. I

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carried her to her mother. A doctor, who was in attendance, said that she had been dead for two hours. Since then I have not danced."

"Good yarn," said the general genially, "with a Californian tang to it. Now, Dick, I caught your horse for you not long ago, and played the Good Samaritan generally. You can cancel that little obligation here, my boy."

"How?"

"Take a look at that little filly prancing with the long-maned colt."

"Wears your racin' colours—primrose?"

"She does."

"Good mover," said Dick critically, "clean pasterns, nice sloping shoulder. Is she in the Stud Book?"

"Her sire has half a column in 'Who's Who.' Only child, bit of an heiress, too, good as gold. She's my niece."

"Is she? Well, what about her?"

"Give her a good time. This is her first big dance. And she knows no young men, a virgin field, b' Jove! and one that the Lord has blessed."

Dick grinned.

"I'll do it. You leave this to me, sir."

"Right!"

2

Dick was duly presented to Mary, and Uncle Tony, much pleased with himself, allowed his thoughts to stray elsewhere. He rather fancied the sprightly dowager in the tiara as a partner at supper. Puddenhurst is famous for its hunt suppers, and an impeccable brand of champagne is provided. He went back to her and sat down, smiling genially. She said ruefully: "I have been so unlucky; the young men in my party are booked up to the last extra."

To this the general replied complacently:

"That's all right, my dear lady. I am sure you

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did your best. By the luck of things, I've secured for my niece a dancing partner. She's going to have the time of her life."

The lady nodded, not sufficiently interested in the Hermit's daughter to ask more questions. Mary's uncle seemed for the moment Mary's principal claim to her consideration. Soon they discovered that they had friends in common. The general told a capital anecdote, ending up: "'Pon my word, I'm enjoying this; and I'd have forked out a tenner after dinner if I could have remained at home with my cigar."

She riposted gaily:

"The selfishness of you confirmed bachelors ought to be taxed heavily."

Immediately the conversation became personal and more intimate. The general twisted his moustache, thinking of the good old 'eighties. But, as he remarked presently, every age has its pleasures. In high good humour with himself and his companion, he spoke of the lure of the—table.

"The green cloth or the white, general?"

"The white, although a well-polished mahogany appeals even more to me, provided, of course, that one has old silver and Waterford glass."

"You are a connoisseur?"

The general spoke with enthusiasm of a few "things" he had collected. Quite ingenuously, he betrayed himself as a lover of "things." Persons, he admitted, with certain delightful exceptions, were disappointing. Mary was forgotten. Her uncle perceived that Dick was 'making good.' A veteran had done what he conceived to be his duty. Dick, obviously, was relieving him gallantly of further responsibility. A glance or two at Mary's beaming face, flushed with excitement and pleasure, warmed the cockles of an aged and indurated heart.

He took his companion into supper and lingered there. After supper, conscious of that inward glow which can be evoked by good food and good works,

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he remained with the sprightly wearer of the tiara. Suddenly, she startled him by exclaiming :

"Good gracious ! Surely that is Captain Kenyon dancing with your little niece ?"

"It is."

"Forgive me, is *he* giving her the time of her life ?"

Something indefinable in her tone challenged the veteran's attention.

"Well, yes ; why not ?"

She eyed him ironically with raised brows.

"You approve ?"

He said testily : "Approve ? But why shouldn't I approve ?"

"You know Captain Kenyon ?"

"I met him last year out hunting."

"Quite."

The lady closed her lips, whereupon the general opened his eyes and nostrils. He saw and scented—something. What ? It struck him, with a certain violence, that he did not "know" Dick Kenyon in the sense implied by his discreet questioner. He had taken for granted that a young fellow who could push his way to the front with the Quorn Hounds must be the "right sort." And, apparently, although Uncle Tony was incredulous of that absurd dancing championship yarn, he could trip it as well as he could ride. Going straight himself at most obstacles, Uncle Tony said bluntly :

"I don't know Dick Kenyon out of the hunting-field. From your tone I infer that you are surprised to find him dancing with my niece, or, rather, surprised that I approve. Is there anything against him ?"

The sprightly lady answered in one word :

"Everything."

"Good Lord !"

The horrid truth was revealed. To make it more convincing and overpowering, the details garbing it

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were given without personal animus. The sprightly lady evidently dealt in facts, facts known to all and sundry not entirely engrossed with their own affairs. Dick Kenyon, to sum up, was a wrong 'un, a sort of moral idiot, with no credentials that count with Mrs. Grundy, except a captivating smile and physical attractiveness. He had figured as co-respondent in an unsavoury divorce case; he was a gambler, a spendthrift, and an undischarged bankrupt. The general's informant ended upon a penetrating note:

"He has had the cheek to come down here to hunt, but the dealers in Puddenhurst, as you can find out for yourself, refuse to mount him unless he pays in advance. They *know* Captain Kenyon."

The unhappy Uncle Tony, quivering like a jelly, murmured mournfully:

"I wondered why he was not dancing."

"The right girls won't dance with him."

In a kinder voice, for she perceived that Uncle Tony was speechless with consternation, she continued:

"Don't look so distressed. No great harm has been done."

"How do we know that?" groaned Uncle Tony. "Wrong 'un or not, the fellow's a thruster. Look at her face!"

Dick was threading his way through the dancers with consummate skill. Mary's head was tilted upward; the man whispered to the maid as they swung down the long room; and she listened smiling, with parted lips, with eyes eloquent of enjoyment. No acute observer could doubt that she was, indeed, having the time of her life, blissfully happy, brimming over with joy in the passing moment. Uncle Tony remembered his words—"a virgin field." He could hardly recognize her. An hour or two seemed to have transformed Mary from a rather prim child into a beguiling witch. As a man of the world, Uncle Tony could understand the appeal of her to such a

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wrong 'un as Kenyon. Unquestionably he, too, was enjoying himself. An ancient charger's withers were wrung as he noted the look in Dick Kenyon's eyes, the unmistakable ardour of the chase.

"Hang the fellow!" he growled, half audibly.

The lady at his side experienced also an odd pang. She might, had she chosen, have taken a livelier interest in the Hermit's daughter. Then, in defence of her own sex, she poured this balm upon Uncle Tony's lacerated tissues:

"A nice girl, general, is proof against sudden assault."

But, in her heart, she was not too sure of this. Nor was he, as he muttered irritably:

"There is no fool like an old fool."

The sprightly lady decided that she felt most awfully sorry for him. Veteran and maid alike presented a draft upon maternal instincts. She remembered that Mary's mother was dead.

"We must take the field together," she declared incisively.

The general, who had managed adequately a brigade during the Great War, observed modestly:

"In a campaign of this sort I shall work gratefully under you."

They glanced at each other not too confidently. The music, perhaps, made them unduly sentimental. What person past middle age is not sensible of the haunting far-away melody of the waltz, or even of rag-time? These two had danced to the fiddling of the immortal Strauss. They recalled his irresistible lure.

"Shall I say a word to her after this dance?"

The dowager frowned, not at the suggestion, but at a problem which presented increasing difficulties. For the moment the fat was in the fire. Mary might be termed plump. If she emerged from the flames slightly fined down, tempered to harder quality, a temporary scorching might be deemed negligible.

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Platitudes, well-worn clichés, invaded her brain. One escaped her lips :

"We must all live and learn."

"I have a lot to learn yet," admitted General Sefton. "Let's colloque."

They colloqued. By some happy inspiration, the veteran remembered the other fellow, the "writing chap," Justin Wakefield. Apparently he was not in the ball-room.

"Do you know Justin Wakefield?"

"Of course I do. Everybody will know him some day."

"You mean that he can write?"

"Puddenhurst doesn't think so, but I was not born in Puddenhurst. He is our parson's son."

"Um! He danced the first dance with Mary."

"Ah! Puddenhurst has it that poor Justin writes sonnets to Mary; but, I fancy, he doesn't show them to her."

"He looked bashful. A suitor undeclared, what? Has he anything to offer?"

"Nothing, except himself."

Uncle Tony swore beneath his breath. He was damning the biologist from heel to head. Why did such bookworms beget daughters? It was high time, indeed, that somebody should butt in. A sense of humour reminded him that he had already butted in with possibly disastrous results. He rose up stiffly.

"Are you going to warn Mary against gay Lothario?"

"Not yet. I mean to have a word, if I can get it, with the parson's son. Then I shall report progress to you."

The dance ended with a "zut." Uncle Tony beheld the wrong 'un whirling Mary into the supper-room. She was clinging to his arm, breathless, almost dazed by the merry-go-round. The elders had supped decorously; the youngsters intended to

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slake their thirsts and assuage their appetites—riotously. He caught Mary's rippling laugh, a tinkle of joy-bells.

3

Uncle Tony, let it be recorded, held scribblers in some contempt, particularly poets. Possibly, he exalted unduly sportsmen, fellows of his own kidney. He believed devoutly—with the ancient Persians—that a man should be able to ride, shoot, and tell the truth. From the point of view of an uncle with a marriage-ripe niece he asked of a putative suitor little more—except, of course, settlements. Those, indeed, were taken for granted.

He found Justin Wakefield in the anteroom, absorbed in introspection. Mary had presented the poet to her uncle, when he asked for a dance. Approaching his quarry, Uncle Tony thought to himself: "Why didn't the idiot ask for half a dozen?"

Nevertheless, he said genially:

"Jolly dance, hay?"

Thus apostrophized, the young man rose courteously, quite unconscious that he was being inspected by a martinet. He replied quietly:

"Being a duffer at it, jàzzing doesn't amuse me much, sir, but the jazzers do."

They sat down together. Physical attractiveness being somewhat at a discount in Uncle Tony's eyes, he tried to peep beneath a plain but not an unprepossessing exterior. Wakefield, at any rate, had a chin and a pair of clear, steady eyes. Quite as much, however, could be said of the general's man-servant.

"My niece tells me you write?"

"I spoil a lot of paper, sir."

The general tacitly commended this modesty, as he continued blandly:

"Does poetry pay?"

Justin stared at him.

"I don't write poetry, General Sefton. I have had

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a few short stories printed, not in the best magazines, and I hope to tackle a novel when I've served my apprenticeship."

"Short stories—novels! I've always wondered how that sort of thing is done?"

Justin answered simply:

"One observes, you know. And then one tries to record the result with—with cumulative interest. Copy can be found anywhere and everywhere."

"You haven't tried the hunting-field?"

"No. You see, sir, I can't afford a horse, and I was badly wounded early in the War—leg shot to bits. That's why I can't jazz decently."

The veteran snorted:

"Nobody, my boy, jazes *decently*. You joined up early, eh? As an officer?"

"I was in the ranks, sir. I became a sergeant just before I was copped."

Soon afterwards Uncle Tony returned to the ball-room. Mary and Dick were still at supper. The sprightly lady smiled upon the veteran.

"You seem cooler and calmer, general."

"Madam, I am boiling inside, boiling with rage against myself. I confess, only to you, that I am not too well pleased with my niece. Why does mere glamour appeal to your sex? This young Wakefield is the right sort."

"I am quite sure as much can be said of Mary. Since you left me I have been thinking hard. I have just declined a second invitation to supper. My first impression of this little affair confirms my more matured judgment. I repeat, 'Don't worry!'"

"But I do—tremendously. This is a case of unconditional surrender. And just now the little baggage went laughing to her doom. I am resolved on instant action. When she appears in the ball-room I shall feign indisposition, serious indisposition. Mary will have to take me home."

The sprightly lady twinkled at him.

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"Really, general, you are wonderful. What resource! And yet I venture to suggest to you that Mary, being what she is, will sooner or later divine—we have amazing instincts, you know—what Dick Kenyon is. And after supper, after a bottle of champagne——"

"Mary doesn't touch wine."

"I am thinking of Captain Kenyon. A pint will not suffice him. After supper, I repeat, he will reveal himself to Mary."

"Not if I know myself," said General Sefton.

As he spoke, Mary and Dick Kenyon appeared in the ball-room. One glance at the wrong 'un's inflamed cheeks and sparkling eyes confirmed the hypothesis that a pint was not sufficient fluid for such a thruster. Mary, however, looked radiant. The general jumped up.

"Good night, my dear lady. You have been kindness itself."

"A last word, general. If you feign serious indisposition, beware of such activity as you displayed just now. Fortunately your niece didn't witness it. Au revoir. Let me give you a cup of tea to-morrow after the chase."

The general bowed, and then wobbled across the ball-room. Mary's face indicated grave concern as she beheld him.

"Dear uncle, what is the matter?"

He replied in a husky voice:

"I am ill, Mary. It's no use mincing matters. I'm dizzy. I may be on the verge of a stroke."

Mary, much alarmed, thought that he looked apoplectic. Dick was of the private opinion that the general had supped too well. Mary said, in a trembling voice:

"I'll take you home at once."

She glanced at Dick, who looked sulky, and then pulled himself together with a visible effort.

"I'll go with you, sir."

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The general, being a tactician, ought to have foreseen this move. He replied testily: "No, no; certainly not. Many thanks. You can help me into my coat and into the car which I ordered. Please see if it is here."

His voice rang out so commandingly that Mary experienced relief. Certainly her uncle was very red in the face and odd in his manner, but his grip upon her arm was reassuring. He began to move towards the door of the anteroom. Dick Kenyon hurried ahead. The sprightly lady, watching these proceedings, thought to herself: "General Sefton is no mummer."

When he reached the anteroom the general was so delighted with his tactics that an uneasy conscience urged him to relieve the very cruel anxiety from which an innocent girl was suffering.

"I exaggerated," he muttered to her. "I am not seriously ill, child. Merely—er—indisposed. Pop on your cloak. I'll wait for you here."

"Ought you to be left, dear uncle?"

"Yes, yes. Hurry up!"

At this moment Justin Wakefield joined them, perceiving from Mary's ingenuous face that something was amiss.

"Can I do anything?" he asked.

"Uncle is——"

"Indisposed," said the general.

"And I am taking him home," added Mary. "Please don't leave him till I come back."

She sped off.

Left alone for a minute with the young man, General Sefton ceased to dissemble. Mary's anxiety, her willingness, almost eagerness, to leave the time of her life touched him profoundly. He contrasted her with the sullen Dick, the villain baulked of his prey! He remarked in his ordinary voice:

"That little niece of mine is a topper."

Justin answered with enthusiasm:

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"One in a million. Are you anything more than indisposed, sir?"

A heart already warmed above its normal temperature detected fresh anxiety. And an old soldier hated lies—even white ones. Accordingly he made light of his indisposition.

"It will pass. It is passing. Call it a rush of blood to the head."

"In that case, sir, would you allow me to take you home? Probably your man has gone to bed. I could help you better than a young girl. And she is having such a good time. I could come back for her later."

The intelligence of elderly gentlemen becomes stimulated by exercise. General Sefton stared, tongue-tied, at a young man who puzzled him. Surely this observer and recorder of incidents of cumulative interest must know that a girl esteemed as one in a million was having a good time with another fellow? The speaker evidently enjoyed his own good time as a looker-on. Such altruism was manifestly absurd. It ought to be nipped. Fibbing had landed him in a quagmire; he felt that he could trust this scribbler. Let him be told the truth.

"Don't ask me questions, my boy. I am taking Mary home, simply because she, not I, has had enough of this."

Justin Wakefield's face indicated such astonishment that the general leaped to the hasty conclusion that he was a fool who ought to wear a cap made of the paper he spoiled.

Two minutes later Mary and her uncle were in the car.

4

When they reached Mr. Ribbleswade's house a wood fire was burning in the library, and on a small table, near the most comfortable arm-chair, was a tray holding whisky, soda water, and glasses. The

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general sank into the arm-chair. His silence during the drive from the village hall had worried Mary not a little. The general also was worried, wondering what he would say and just how he ought to say it. He was now about to attempt the rôle of mother.

"A small drink, my dear."

"Ought you to take it, uncle?"

"Yes; there is nothing the matter with me at all. I never felt better, physically, in my life."

Too astonished to reply, Mary filled a rummer. As her uncle took it he said curtly: "I came away on your account."

"On mine?"

"If your dear mother had been alive she would have taken you away as I did."

"But why?"

Playing the part of mother, the general assumed a maternal solicitude of expression that Mary might have thought comic on a less serious occasion. She was puzzled, but she grasped one insistent fact. This bachelor uncle, whom she had regarded as beyond her horizon, now loomed up immense, as a beaming star of the first magnitude, radiating affection.

He took her small hand and held it tenderly.

"Somehow," he said, "you have taken your mother's place in my old heart."

She bent down and kissed him. Then, releasing her hand, she fetched a small stool, sitting beside him, with her head close to his knee. The general drank half his drink and said solemnly:

"Whilst I talk to you, Mary, I'll smoke a small cigar."

"One of father's?"

"Certainly not; one of my own. Don't move."

He lighted his cigar.

"Your father buys good cigars," he began, "but he doesn't take care of them. Cigars, wine, horses and women must be cared for—*watched*."

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He thought she winced slightly, but she remained silent. He went on softly, in a voice she had never heard before from him. Let us say that it was the voice of romance. Old bachelors wax romantic after supper, when logs are smouldering on the hearth and the lights are shaded.

"I have been watching you this evening, Mary."

He paused and laid his hand lightly on her head. She noticed that it trembled a little as his fingers smoothed her soft hair. He continued: "You look upon me as a crusty old fellow, but I can remember my youth. I remember a girl I danced with before you were born. I might, perhaps, have married her, but she hadn't a bob of her own, and I was a subaltern on an insufficient allowance. So we drifted apart, inevitably. Well, my dear, I danced many dances with her on that particular night I remember so vividly. And, oddly enough, it happened to be a hunt ball. I saw something in her eyes that once seen is never forgotten, never—the love-light." He laughed derisively, and his hand felt heavy on her head. "It is reasonably certain, Mary, that her mother, a match-making, mid-Victorian mamma, saw what I saw. Anyway, she took her daughter away, and somehow, as I say, we drifted apart. Look at me, my dear."

Mary turned her head. Her cheeks were a deeper damask, her eyes were troubled, but they met the old man's keen glance honestly. He heaved a portentous sigh as he muttered irritably:

"Dash it all! I wish I could spare you. I saw that unmistakable light in your eyes just before supper. And you laughed just as She laughed. And so, as your mother is not here, I—I took you away."

Mary said slowly:

"I—I can't understand how you guessed. It's no use denying it to you. It's true."

The general was taken aback. He had expected—and was prepared for—evasions, the elusiveness of

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the nymph. He stammered out: "Dear, dear! Whatever fools and sages may say to the contrary, love at first sight is—is—er—devastating, isn't it?"

"I—I suppose so, uncle. We both agreed that it was—devastating."

"We? You mean, then, that there is a sort of understanding between you and this young fellow?"

The unmistakable love-light flooded her eyes as she murmured shyly:

"Ye-es."

"Good God!"

"Oh, uncle! Why do you say that?"

"Because, Mary, you must tear this—this—er—interloper out of your heart. He is utterly unworthy of you."

Her eyes flashed.

"He isn't. I'm unworthy of him. Interloper! What a word!"

"I withdraw it, Mary, I withdraw it. Let us be perfectly calm. Like other daughters of Eve, you have been caught by mere glamour. A man who knows all the arts of love has beguiled you."

"All the arts of love? I am the very first."

"You unhappy child! You believe that?"

"I know it," she affirmed with a proud smile.

By this time Uncle Tony was feeling not only irritable but tired. Innocence is often exasperating to experience. He finished his whisky and soda and puffed savagely at his cigar.

"Your father must deal with this."

He perceived that this was a blow over the heart. Mary quivered.

"You mean to tell him?"

"After breakfast, to-morrow morning. I—I mean to-day."

"Oh-h-h!"

She looked piteous. The general melted at sight of her distress.

"Come, my pretty," he said kindly. "Face the

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music. You are a plucky girl, of fighting stock, too, on your mother's side. This young fellow is a wrong 'un. I can prove it, but I hate to do it. Dammy, it isn't in me to soil your white little mind with dirty details."

The fighting stock showed itself plainly.

"As for that, uncle, I simply defy you to do it. One—one dirty detail will do for me."

The general replied grimly:

"So be it! This hero of yours figured, and figured shamelessly, as co-respondent, if you know what that means, in a notorious suit for divorce."

"That," said Mary firmly, "is a wicked lie. My Justin"—she drew herself up—"is clean—clean."

The general gurgled and choked.

"What did you say?" he gasped.

"My Justin is clean."

"Your—Justin?"

"He is mine. He has never belonged to anybody else."

"But, b-b-bless my soul, I'm speaking of Captain Kenyon, with whom you have flirted outrageously all this evening."

Mary stared at him and burst out laughing. Her laugh, so mirthful, so fresh and spontaneous, became infectious. The general threw back his head and laughed with her. Not for a minute, at least, did sober reason reassume her sway. Then the veteran said peremptorily:

"And now, you little rogue, explain matters, if you can."

Her explanation is given verbatim.

"You introduced Captain Kenyon to me, didn't you?" Uncle Tony nodded solemnly. "You told him to give me a good time. He did. He dances divinely. Poor Justin can't dance. He hurt himself horribly when he tried. Captain Kenyon may be the wickedest man that ever lived, but he was ever so nice to me."

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"I'm sure he was," growled Uncle Tony. "Go on, missie."

"Well, my Justin was in such pain after the first dance that he intended to go home. I introduced him to Captain Kenyon. I—I think that he may have guessed something. Anyway, he promised to look after me and take me in to supper. Justin didn't go, because he said that he wanted to watch me having a good time. Wasn't that sweet of him?"

The general answered truthfully:

"Your Justin's faith in you is remarkable."

"Also he said that the ball-room was chock-a-block with 'copy.' I expect he's got you and that queer old dear *you* were flirting with so outrageously."

"I wasn't."

"You spent the whole evening with her and took her in to supper. People who live in glass houses, you know——"

"Yes, I know."

Mary murmured maliciously:

"Precept is so much easier than practice, isn't it? I won't tell father about—*you*."

"Now, Mary, come off it! Why—why didn't your Justin, who, by the way, is not yours yet, take you in to supper?"

She blushed.

"I'm not surprised at that question. Justin and Captain Kenyon tossed up for me, and Justin lost. Captain Kenyon can't be really very wicked, because he offered to give me up, but Justin said that he paid when he lost."

"Um! Dick Kenyon can't affirm as much."

"That's all," said Mary. She stood on tiptoe and kissed the general.

"Uncle Tony, you won't tell father about Justin?"

"My dear, duty is duty. I ought to tell your father. I don't understand why you have kept this—this engagement, or—or entanglement——"

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"We are engaged, of course."

"Without his permission or approval."

"He mightn't give his permission—yet."

"Now, what d'ye mean by that?"

"Justin is really selling his stuff, and it isn't stuff. He calls it that. Soon he'll be making a fair income. And then we shall go to father."

The general is still honoured in the shires as a thruster. He looked hard at Mary as she stood before him in her bravery, and spoke with finality :

"I shall tell your father the truth, Mary. And I shall make him a sporting proposition. I wanted this night to be the real right thing for you. And, b' Jove! it shall be. Whatever your father can be persuaded to allow you shall be doubled by me. Kiss me again, child, and hop off to bed."

SANCTUARY

I

ADAM HENBEST was approaching his native village after an absence of twenty years. The homing instinct had been strong. Earning big wages as a lumberman in the woods of Canada, tempted to settle down in a new country of infinite possibilities, he had always known that he would return to the Forest of Ys, to the places and people familiar to him from childhood.

The light of a February evening was failing as he passed an outlying cottage. The cottage where Adam had been born lay at the farther end of Upton English; so he had to walk through the village, a pleasant pilgrimage. Lights from small windows twinkled cheerily. Heavily coated, muffled to the nose, with a hat pulled down, Adam strode along, carrying a small suit-case. When a gaffer, whom he recognized, said "Good night to 'ee," he made no reply. Salutations and greetings would be in order on the morrow. For the moment he was thinking hard, not in the mood for speech.

He took but scant notice of the church and The Cat and Fiddle Inn. Not a hundred yards from the tavern was a smug brick house with a garden behind it encompassed by a yew fence. A lane crossed the main road at right angles to the corner of the fence. Adam hesitated, and then, almost furtively, walked down the lane till he came to a side entrance. He stood still and listened. Above the fence he could see lights in the house. Then, doggedly, he strolled on down the lane, past the common, past a pond,

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till he found himself in the forest. Once off the road his pace quickened. He skirted a bit of bog, jumped what foresters call a "gutter," and found himself in a wilderness of scrub oak and hollies—those inseparable first cousins in the Forest of Ys. Finally he reached a tiny clearing, a fairy's glade, a lovers' trysting place, silvered by a waning moon.

Here he had received the overwhelming shock of his life. Here he had met secretly Verbena Gear, the only daughter of William Gear, grocer and baker, who owned the smug red brick house and other property. William Gear had said that Adam Henbest was "no class." William had forbidden Adam to enter his house. Love, of course, laughs at such vetoes. Verbena was romantic, and being small, eyed with approval a big upstanding young fellow. Verbena conceived the happy thought of inscribing in white chalk a cross upon the garden door. The cross, eloquent of kisses, and as easily obliterated, meant that Verbena would keep tryst on Sunday afternoons with Adam. Its absence indicated no Verbena and no kisses. Upon a February afternoon twenty years ago the white cross had been absent from the corner panel of the door. But Adam, with nothing to beguile his leisure, had strolled on to the glade, intending to smoke there, secure from irritating interruptions. Upon the soft moss of the glade he moved silently, till he saw Verbena and his best friend, George King, seated side by side upon a log—and laughing!

Adam clenched his vast fists and trembled with rage. His friend had stolen his girl. He saw red.

Nevertheless he did—nothing.

The slow-working mind of the woodman absorbed the facts. He was not yet engaged to Verbena. She had the right to pick another "boy." Some instinct told him that if he laid violent hands upon a weaker man he might kill him. He wanted to kill him. George knew all about his feelings for Verbena,

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knew that Verbena met him here. Together they were laughing at him.

And George was the more eligible suitor for the grocer's daughter, the son of a small farmer—*class!*

Afraid of himself, Adam left the glade and hastened on and upwards till he reached the high moor, where the strong sou'-west wind purged him of murderous thoughts. He decided that if George wanted a faithless baggage he could have her. Probably, so he reflected, she would change partners again and again, because the devotion of one man would never suffice her. She would play with fire till she burnt her fingers.

Sorely wounded, he obeyed the instinct of wounded creatures. He had saved enough money to pay for a passage to Canada. To Canada he went, after finishing a hurdling job miles away from Upton English.

Now he had come back.

2

He was welcomed by an aged mother and a widowed sister, who were expecting him. Lizzie, the sister, observed genially :

"Now you're homealong, Ad, mother can get on wi' her dyin', if she's a mind that way."

Mrs. Henbest, still hale and hearty, said shrilly :

"I told pa'son, yas, I did, that I wouldn't be downscrambled till I saw my son agen."

She gazed with pride at his sturdy figure, bronzed face and grizzled beard.

"Will 'ee bide along wi' us?" she asked anxiously. Adam nodded. He was trying to measure the changes in these two persons and in himself. The familiar dialect fell tenderly upon his ears. He had much to say, but the women would talk themselves out first, telling him what he wanted to know. They knew nothing about his love affair

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with Verbena. George King, and George alone, must have guessed why an old friend had disappeared. What had happened to George? Somehow he couldn't ask that question. Had George married Verbena?

Lizzie chattered on :

"You bain't forgotten, Ad. Some folks was miffed 'cos you went off so casual-like, but all that's ancient history. Neighbours ha' been very neighbourly. Garge King sent us a ham of his own curing agen your homecoming."

"Did he?" murmured Adam. "Is—is George married?"

"Lard presarve us! Course he is. Nine arrers in his quiver, too. Garge 'll drop in to-morrer."

"Whom did he marry, Lizzie?"

"Well, I never! Fancy you not a-knowin' that. We must ha' told 'ee."

"No."

"Garge married one o' Farmer Broomfield's darters."

Mrs. Henbest piped up :

"A good kind Christian man is Garge."

Within five minutes Adam grasped a nettle. George had befriended his people. Could charitable action on his part be regarded as the ripe fruit of penitence? To Adam's palate such fruit was bitter as Dead Sea apples. The women prattled on, but they never mentioned Verbena. At supper Adam declined ham.

He slept that night in his old room, in his old bed. And he slept soundly. He was up and about before the others, driven by the gadfly, curiosity, to walk the length of the village street. He passed the smug brick house twice. Above the shop windows Adam read the familiar name "Gear." He wondered whether Verbena's purse-proud father was still alive. It was too early to find out. He wondered, too, whether Verbena had heard of his return. In

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a small village news percolates to all ears. Probably Verbena still served customers. Adam and she had taken advantage of this to slip notes into each other's hands. During those far-off days Lizzie had been astonished at receiving many small packets of bull's-eyes and pear drops. Adam remembered that each letter to Verbena had cost him a penny.

Good money wasted!

He was staring at the shop windows, when he heard his own name.

"Adam Henbest, I do declare!"

He was greeted by a man not much older than himself, a fellow woodman, now wearing the Crown livery, which indicated promotion and prosperity. To wear this livery had been one of Adam's cherished ambitions ever since he left school. Really that had been behind his courtship of Verbena.

Adam, after returning the cordial greetings of an old acquaintance, asked a question:

"Is old William Gear still sanding his sugar?"

"Dead an' buried five years ago come Michaelmas. Miss Gear runs the shop."

Miss Gear!

Again his tongue refused to function. Fortunately, a garrulous man failed to notice this. Adam, even in his youth, had been a fellow of silences, a listener. He listened now, and was further enlightened.

"A queerish old maid, and a bit of a pincher, like her dad. Very set in her ways; keeps herself to herself."

"An old maid," growled Adam, stroking his beard.

"Her fault. Said 'No' till all the likely men grew tired of askin' her to say 'Yes.' Soured, maybe. I dunno."

He nodded and passed on. Adam went back to his mother's cottage. Was George responsible for this old maidenhood?

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Over a sizzling rasher he mentioned Miss Gear to Lizzie, who sniffed.

"Me an' mother never could make her out. She's rich, but you wouldn't think it to look at her. Works in the shop as she allers did."

"What do you call rich?" asked Adam.

"She's rich enough to do nothing."

"So am I," said Adam, "but I shall get to work, my girl, as soon as I spot a likely opening."

Lizzie gaped at him. Adam, from time to time during the past ten years, had sent home remittances. But she failed to envisage her own brother as rich enough to do nothing.

"You allers did like your joke, Ad."

But, with the delicacy that distinguishes so many poor people, Lizzie did not ask her brother how rich he was.

About eleven George King burst into a tiny parlour, seizing Adam's hand and wringing it affectionately. Time had treated George kindly. Small, shrewd eyes twinkled out of a red, crinkly, clean-shaven face; a jovial laugh rang through the room.

"Beard or no beard, I'd ha' known 'ee."

Lizzie brought ale, and left the two men to drink it alone. George talked of his small farm, his wife and his children. Adam smoked his pipe. He was telling himself that George appeared to be an honest man. George asked a question:

"Never found anybody you liked better than yourself over there?"

"No."

Undismayed by the curt monosyllable, George said slyly:

"More 'n one pretty maid in this parish 'll set her cap at 'ee, I'll be bound. Now that you're older an' wiser, you won't run away this time, will 'ee?"

"Run away?" repeated Adam.

"Thunderation! You did run away from Verbeny Gear."

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"And you—you blame me?"

George looked bewildered, but he answered the question according to his lights.

"I don't blame you," he replied guardedly, dropping the familiar Doric. "Verbena, maybe, was too prim and finicky. But you told me you wanted her."

"Yes, I did, more than I've ever wanted anything."

"I thought she wanted you."

Adam rose ponderously.

"George," he said, "you did the dirty on me, but I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

"I did the dirty on you, Ad? Never! Quite the contrary, old lad. I did my damndest to—to ginger things up. I thought you was both too foresty. Yes, I spoke my mind to Verbena, and I should have spoken my mind to you, but you offed it without a word."

Adam sat down again. He spoke peremptorily.

"Please tell me what you said to Verbena."

George scratched his head. Foresters have astounding memories for details. The details came back one by one.

"Well, Ad, you told me about the meetin's in the Forest, and the chalk cross on the door, and it did seem to me that you were gettin' no forrarder; so I took a notion, quite a notable notion, to speed you up." He chuckled. "So one Sunday afternoon, for a bit of a joke, I thought I'd butt in. Didn't fancy the job, neither. It worried me how I'd get Verbena alone. But where there's a will there's a way, as the sayin' goes. I was passing the old garden gate, and there was your cross, put there, as you told me, by Verbena. Thinks I, I'll wipe out the cross an' meet the maid, bashful though she be. It'll be a rare lark. So I wiped out the chalk and waited by pond. Presently Verbena comes tripping along, and I followed her quiet as any

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mouse. Lordie ! how she coloured up when she saw me. In two jiffs I had her laughing, because I told her my secret. I wanted Mary Broomfield, and her father kept me out of his house. I told her that Mary meant to have me, and that a lover came before any father. Yes, Ad, I made things easy for you. And next day you offed it. I wasn't half miffed, and what Verbena thought the dear Lord only knows."

"I saw you laughing with her," said Adam slowly. "It was in my mind to kill you, George. *That's why I offed it.*"

In stupefaction George finished his glass of ale and fled. The situation was beyond him.

3

Life's ironies and side-slaps defy analysis. Adam knew that George had told him the truth. He and Verbena had been the victims of a joke.

To calm himself down he played with Lizzie's youngest children, not at school on Saturday. Obviously they expected "sweeties," and informed a new uncle where he could get them.

"Li'l ole Miss Gear has lovely chocklits."

"An' pepmints."

Recklessly he promised to buy both, but he was saying to himself: "I can't face her, I can't."

Not being proof against importunity, he accompanied two small nieces as far as the grocer's shop. But he remained outside when the children hurried in to spend sixpence. Presently the elder child said proudly:

"We tole Miss Gear that our uncle from Canady was homealong."

"Our beaver uncle," added the younger.

"Did—did Miss Gear say anything?"

"Oh, yes. She said she'd never know you, if so be as you wore a beard. Why ever do you wear a beard, uncle?"

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"To hide my face," replied Adam. "It never was, at best, a face to write home about."

The three returned to the cottage. Lizzie's children knew all the villagers. Adam was presented to four young women as "Our uncle from Canady." Smiles were his portion. Post-war maidens regarded him with interest. A backwoodsman decided that three out of the four were too "dolled up." When his nieces asked him to play "bear" with them he replied cryptically: "I'll play with you two till you start powdering your noses."

Next day he saw Verbena Gear in the parish church. She looked an old maid; she wore old-fashioned clothes, austere in tint and cut. And yet something of the former daintiness lingered; and he recognized the flute-like quality of her voice when she sang the Venite.

"O come, let us sing unto the Lord."

Adam did not sing, staring at the prayer-book in Verbena's hands. Into that prayer-book, two-and-twenty years ago, he had slipped a note. When, later on, Verbena rebuked him for behaving like a miserable sinner, he had asked her if she had destroyed the note unread. She hadn't. Adam was emboldened to say that he might be a sinner, but assuredly he was not miserable.

"Harden not your hearts: as in the provocation . . ."

The injunction seemed to float to him from Verbena. The village choir was bellowing perfunctorily, but Verbena articulated her words with startling significance. Why wasn't she hard as hickory under provocation?

In a side aisle he could see George and his buxom wife and plump children. Before service George had come to him, saying piteously:

"I meant well, old man, I meant well."

Sanctuary

Adam shook an outstretched hand, muttering :

"We'll leave it at that, George, for ever and ever."

"When you see her, maybe you'll think that all is for the best, anyhow."

"Maybe I shall."

Now that he had seen her he was inclined to believe this. Sentiment seemed to be oozing from every pore in his skin. About this small woman he had been incredibly sentimental. She, and she only, had softened and hardened his mental tissues. Looking at her through the mists of twenty years, he told himself that her outlook on life must be different from his. She had remained in the old ways; he had blazed a trail through primæval forests.

4

After service George and Adam walked together across the fields to George's house. House and fields were freehold property in the heart of the Forest of Ys. According to George, small freeholders were on the edge of bankruptcy, unless they sold their tiny farms to the resident gentry. George had inherited the farm with a "plaster" attached to it. Adam asked bluntly: "How much?" George, not too willingly, said that five hundred pounds would clear him. He nearly fell dead of apoplexy when Adam said, almost brutally: "I pay my debts. I'll pay you five hundred pounds."

"What for?" stammered George.

"If it hadn't been for you I might have married Verbena Gear. If it hadn't been for you I should have stuck here and remained a woodman. I can give you this money, which you helped me to make, and not miss it."

"Couldn't accept it."

"Yes, you can, and you will. Your missus 'll see to that."

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Hurriedly George changed the talk.

"You saw Verbena in church?" Adam nodded. "Did you speak to her afterwards? No? Why not?"

"Didn't feel like it. Now, George, not a word to her about that mistake twenty years ago."

"Not another word," repeated George. He ought to have added that Verbena had been told the night before. Verbena accepted his artless explanation, but she added primly: "Please don't tell Adam that you have told me. Promise!" George promised. Now, obviously, Adam Henbest believed that the loss of Verbena might be reckoned a gain. Adam would marry some plump young woman. Sustained by this conviction, George prattled about Bessie Broomfield, his wife's youngest sister. At the Sunday dinner Adam found himself seated next to this engaging young person, and not insensible to her charms. The butter happened to be of her making. And she didn't powder her nose!

When the women went out, leaving the two men to drink some full-bodied port, Adam spoke disparagingly of Verbena Gear, until he found that George agreed with him.

"Spindlin' sort of plant, eh?"

"On the thin side."

"Bit of a pincher, so they tell me."

"I dessay."

"But—is she? Perhaps she has to pinch."

"More'n likely."

"Rubbish! Mother and Lizzie say she's rich."

George said emphatically:

"You take it from me she isn't."

"But old William must have left her all his cheese-parings."

George shook his head.

"Old William left a pot o' money still owing to him. I doubt if Verbena has collected any of it. Have another glass o' port?—won't hurt you."

Sanctuary

"Don't mind if I do."

As Adam filled his glass George murmured nervously :

"Whatever will you say to Verbena when you do meet her?"

"I'm not calculating on meeting her, except, maybe, in the way of business."

"But you were good friends; and I, innocent as Moses in the bulrushes, came betwixt you. Darn it! you owe it to her, and you owe it to me, to make friends again."

Adam sipped his port. George continued hearteningly :

"I'll lay half a crown that she's expecting you to drop in this very afternoon."

"Not she."

"You'll be no man if you don't."

"Shut up!" growled Adam.

Wisely George said no more. But later on, about three in the afternoon, the two old friends walked back to the village, meeting on the way more than one pair of lovers. Adam eyed these philanderers grimly; George grinned. As they passed the Gear house he said:

"Pop in, Ad, and get it off your chest."

Adam hesitated. George rang the bell and gripped Adam firmly by the arm.

"Let go, George."

"You ask for a cup o' tea."

"I wouldn't ask for anything else."

A small, red-cheeked maid opened the door.

"Is Miss Gear in?" asked George.

"Yas, zur."

"Mr. Adam Henbest wants to see her."

"Yas, zur."

Very meekly Adam followed the little maid as she tripped down a passage. George, whistling to himself, crossed the road, lit a pipe, and waited patiently.

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5

Verbena greeted Adam politely.

"I heard you had come home, Mr. Henbest. I'm glad to see you looking so well."

"Thank you, Miss Gear."

She indicated a chair; Adam sat uneasily upon it. Memories of a moss-encrusted log assailed him. Involuntarily he glanced at Verbena's waist.

"Are you going back to Canada?"

"Haven't made any plans yet."

"I was so pleased to hear that you had prospered over there."

"I've made a bit o' money, Miss Gear. It's a sight easier to make money than to keep it."

"Ah! It's not easy to keep anything really worth having."

She spoke sincerely, in the same soft voice that had beguiled Adam long ago. Her eyes rested tranquilly upon his.

"You haven't changed much," he said bluntly.

She said slowly:

"The passing years don't change us much—except physically. In character and temperament we remain what we were, unless——"

"Unless——?"

"I speak as a woman. Love changes us—and hate; love for the better, hate for the worse. I thank God that I have never hated."

Adam winced. He had come back to Upton English hating two persons. Their misfortunes—had they been unfortunate—would not have displeased him. And this afternoon, now, his keen eyes were seeking blemishes, trying to find ugliness rather than beauty. As he followed the servant down the passage he had said to himself: "I'll satisfy myself that old George did me a rare good turn years ago."

Was this little old maid a pincher?

Sanctuary

"I told you I'd made money, Miss Gear. Have you?"

"Oh, no."

"You surprise me. Why not?"

"Can't you guess?" He shook his head. "Bad debts. That is always the trouble with village shops. Father, you remember, ran a bakery too. Well, father was——"

Her voice trailed into silence, because Adam, quite unconsciously, scowled at the mention of the man whom he reckoned purse-proud; but she picked up speech quickly.

"Father wasn't what you thought him. He lost a lot of money with the bakery, because poor folk must have bread. You can't refuse bread to a neighbour. And it's much the same with groceries. If I could collect the outstanding accounts——"

"Don't the gentry deal with you, Miss Gear?"

"Not now. They buy in the cheapest markets."

"Am I to understand that you—you are going behind?"

She murmured evasively:

"I'm not going ahead. Times are hard all over the country. You may go back to Canada, because you know that."

"I see opportunities right here. I know my own ropes. I—I could pull in a lot of slack if—if other things were right. I came home expecting changes; I don't find 'em. The big change is in myself. And I never knew it. I'm hunting my old self. Good night."

He jumped up abruptly, reaching for his hat and stick. Verbena smiled faintly.

"It isn't—'good-bye'?"

"Not yet."

Leaving Verbena, Adam visited for the second time the old trysting place. But he little guessed that

Leaves from Arcady

an old maid, from her bedroom window, had seen him take the lane and cross the common, skirting the pond at the farther end.

Adam missed the convenient log, but he noted that the beech buds were swelling. He stood still, inhaling the air, trying to detect the first faint fragrance of spring. The oaks and the hollies were eloquent of winter—many winters.

He glanced at his watch. At this very hour, on Sunday afternoons, she had come to him, flitting through the trees. Often she had been late, and he could remember the pangs that assailed him when she failed to come.

"Shy, timorsome creature—and a gert, stoopid gowk of a lad!"

The captivating notes of a blackbird answered this apostrophe.

Adam shrugged his broad shoulders and walked to a coign of vantage. Peering through the screen of hollies, he could see the "gutter" and the boggy bit beyond it. Here he had stood many a time waiting for Verbena.

Presently he rubbed his eyes. In the far distance he perceived a woman. Probably a picker-up of firewood.

No; it was Verbena. She, like himself, had been moved to revisit the sanctuary. Swiftly he hid behind a great oak.

Standing behind the oak, he became a prey to the liveliest apprehension, torn in two between sentiment and sense. Sentiment was warming his body; sense cooled his mind. Was this woman pursuing him on the desperate chance of capturing a rich husband? Was she after him or after what he had?

He dared not guess.

The next moment she appeared, slightly breathless, and gazed about her. Exercise had brought a pink flush to her cheeks; her eyes sparkled. Youth seemed to have touched her with magical fingers.

Sanctuary

And then the flush faded, the eyes dimmed. A soft sob of disappointment escaped from her trembling lips.

Adam stepped from behind the oak and approached her. She smiled expectantly.

"Verbena!"

"Yes, Adam?"

"You knew I was here?"

"I—I saw you take the lane. I—I guessed."

"And you followed me, because——?"

She laughed gaily.

"Because of the chalk cross on the garden door. You put the cross on the door, Ad, didn't you, because you knew that George had told me the truth?"

George!

Wits sharpened on Canadian grindstones came to the rescue. George had wiped out the white cross; George had put it back. Adam lied magnificently.

"Yes, Verbeny, I put the cross on the door."

She laid her small hands upon his shoulders, gazing up at him.

"I always hoped and prayed that we should meet again—here."

Even then incredulity had him by the throat. He exclaimed hoarsely:

"You believed, after all these years, that we should come together—here?"

"Yes, I did. I can prove it."

She glided past him, turning to beckon. He followed her, still doubting, across the glade till they came to a noble beech beyond the oaks and hollies. She raised her finger and pointed.

Upon the silvery bark, upon the south side of the trunk, where no moss grew, a woodman's sharp knife had cut deeply four letters, A. H. and V. G., surrounded by a circle. Deeply as they had been cut, twenty years would have obliterated them. A faithful woman had seen to it that it was not so.

"You blessed darling!" exclaimed Adam.

EVARANNIE

I

EVARANNIE looked at herself in a small glass that could not be described as flattering. She had just pinned on a hat which she had "done up" miraculously at a cost of two and elevenpence. A wrinkle showed itself vertically between her grey eyes, because she was wondering whether her Albert might consider that the hat had been "done in." He had, indeed, given Evarannie the hat when he was earning good wages. Now he was out of work and out of temper.

By the side of the unflattering glass, in a silver frame, was Albert's photograph in khaki. He had survived the Great War. That, to Evarannie, meant only one thing: God had been kind to her. Her man had been spared; her prayers had been answered.

She stared at the reflected image anxiously. Before the war, when she had become engaged to Albert, with no obstacles between the youthful pair and the altar except the difficulty of getting a cottage, Evarannie had been pleased with her face, because it pleased Albert. In those care-free days her face, whatever hypercritics might think of it, exhibited bloom. Dimples played hide and seek about damask cheeks. Now the dimples had vanished; the damask had faded; the bloom would never return—never!

Such reflections were tempered by gratitude.

"I ought to be thankful," she murmured.

Her too pale face brightened as she slipped on a pair of gloves which she had washed the day before. Then she eyed doubtfully a "shower-proof" which

Evarannie

had survived many showers. It might rain. Probably it would rain if she left the ancient garment on its peg. And the silkette "sports coat" of amethystine tint, her latest purchase, was only a fair weather friend.

The "shower-proof" remained on its peg.

Evarannie ran down the back stairs, exchanged a jest with the cook as she scurried through the kitchen, and debouched upon a back yard sadly in need of gravel. Albert would be waiting for her just outside the lodge, a quarter of a mile away. If she kept him kicking his heels in a north-east wind he would be cross.

Half-way to the trysting-place she remembered that she had left the pantry safe unlocked.

"Bother that old safe!" she exclaimed.

None the less, the safe and what it held represented advancement, triumph, clouds of glory which trailed behind her when she "went over" home to mother and sisters. It was hardly credible that she, Evarannie, now stood in the shoes of an aged butler, entrusted by her master not only with the key of the safe, but with the key of the cellar!

And, *ex officio*, she was called by her surname—Biffen. She reigned supreme in a pantry that had boasted a butler and two footmen before the war.

Evarannie stood still, sorely tempted. She glanced at a cheap wrist-watch, another gift of Albert. To run back to duty meant the loss of ten precious minutes. But she recalled what her master had said when she was raised to the dignities and emoluments of head parlourmaid:

"I can trust you, Biffen."

She hastened back to the house, locked the safe, and hid the key.

Albert, meanwhile, was waxing impatient, being not too warmly clad. He had been footman before

Leaves from Arcady

the war in the establishment where Evarannie was now working. She had risen to heights, whereas he had fallen into the abyss of unemployment. It was little satisfaction to reflect that hundreds of thousands of other men had tumbled over the same precipice. Still, he hugged to his breast the consoling reflection that a "chance" had at last presented itself. Work at a big wage was offered to him. But what would Evarannie say?

Presently she came bustling through the lodge gates, sorely out of breath. Albert kissed her rather perfunctorily, so she thought, as he growled out something about the north-east wind not complimentary to rude Boreas.

"I'm ever so sorry I'm late. I forgot to lock the safe."

"Damn the safe, and everything in it!" He added contemptuously: "I don't suppose there's much left in it, anyway."

"That's where you slip up, Bert. My lady's di'monds are in it. So there!"

She eyed him half maternally. He was thin, as she was, and pale, but a fair figure of a man improved physically by active service. He carried an intelligent head upon broad shoulders. His eyes were clear and well set. His chin indicated resolution.

"Where's your nice warm overcoat, dear?"

"Ask Uncle," he replied, not ungenially. Then he frowned.

"Don't you talk to me, my girl, about my lady's diamonds."

"They're going to be sold."

"What!"

"Isn't it a shame?"

Bert said doggedly:

"No, it isn't. It fair mads me to see women tricked out with furs and diamonds when two million men are out of employment."

"You—Bolshie!"

Evarannie

She tried to laugh him into a happier humour. Bert didn't laugh; he scowled.

"They've had their innings," he muttered. "A lot of people think just as I do, that it lasted too long."

"I'm ever so sorry for them."

"Are you? Well, I ain't."

To her dismay he burst into argument, passionate invective to which she listened, sensible that wiser wits than hers might answer him, and yet sympathizing with the man because he was the victim of cruel circumstance.

"We were promised better wages, easier work, a bit o' leisure, and a home. Lies—lies—lies!"

"You'll get work, dear."

"But—I don't get it *here*. God knows, and you know, that I've tried hard enough."

"You did your bit."

"What did I do it for? To starve? To sponge on my own father and mother? I tell you the truth—what I learned in the trenches. We fought for liberty. To-day I'm a slave. And you ask me to be sorry for them as has to sell diamonds. Diamonds! And I've nothing to sell—except these"—he held out two trembling hands—"and nobody wants 'em."

Evarannie clutched him.

"Bert, you frighten me so."

Some pathetic inflection in her voice arrested attention. He stood still, gazing into piteous eyes. Then he kissed her, straining a too thin body to his chest. Happiness came back as he whispered hoarsely:

"I have you, Evarannie. And you—you ain't for sale. Diamonds couldn't buy you."

They found a bank in the lew of the wind and sat down. Not far away, at a bend of the road, sheltered by trees and rising ground, in a small garden still gay with Michaelmas daisies and scarlet

Leaves from Arcady

geraniums, stood a tiny cottage dear to amateur artists, heavily thatched, whitewashed, with black beams below the deep eaves. Albert pointed to it.

"Out there"—he indicated with a sweep of his arm distant France—"I thought of *that*. I only wanted *that*. Me and you, Evarannie, in *that*."

"I know, Bert, I know."

"The Boches blew that, and everything else, to smithereens. Well, Evarannie, I'm fed up with old England. I've had a letter from my cousin in America. He's stud groom to a sporting gent of sorts, polo player, a crackerjack, so Bill says. Bill can get me a billet as valet with him, at wages which mean—you."

"Me?"

"I can save enough in one year to send for you. You'll come when I whistle, won't you?"

"Yes."

"But I've not the cash to get there."

Evarannie said sadly:

"I did ought to have saved something, but I haven't."

They sat on in silence, thinking hard. Evarannie made a suggestion.

"If you spoke to his lordship—you worked for him for five years—he—he might advance the money."

"I have spoken to him."

"He refused help?"

"He said as how he'd think it over. That means—napoo. He did give me a whackin' fine character, but that cost him nothing."

"Bert, dear, in their way, which isn't our way, they're driven as we are. I hear 'em talking about it at table. They'd let this big place, if they could. Why, really and truly, they want what we want—a cottage."

"That be blowed for a fairy tale."

"But it's true," she persisted. "They have sold

Evarannie

pictures and minnyatures. And she—she makes over her hats same as I do."

But Bert remained unconvinced, as Evarannie continued:

"My lady says the whole country ought to have been told after the war that we was in for terrible times. The bills has to be paid."

"There's money to pay 'em, Evarannie. I get hot in the collar when I think o' the money which the profiteers are burning."

"Course you do. So do I."

She tried, not unsuccessfully, to steer the talk into the old pleasant channels. She recalled the days when he was a footman and she a second housemaid, pitchforked into parlour work when the men had to join up.

"You taught me to polish silver. You give me your indiarubber and some rouge."

"And now you've got my job."

"Do you grudge me that, dear?"

"It sets a man to thinking. Yes, they was beano times, to be sure."

"I have your old room," said Evarannie.

"And you ain't scared?"

"Why should I be?"

Bert laughed, not harshly, and pressed her closer to him.

"Plucky little bit, I declare."

"But why should I be scared?"

"I'll tell you something. It scared me, yes, it did. And I wasn't the butler, neither. I didn't have the key of the safe. Where do you keep it nights?"

"Under me pillow."

"And s'pose a burglar woke you up and asked for it. What would you do, hay? I just wonder whether his lordship has ever thought of the risks you run. Not he."

"Wrong again, Bert. I ain't scared. For why? His lordship told me what to do."

Leaves from Arcady

"Did he?"

"Yes. When he handed over the key of the safe to me he says: 'I'm trusting you, Biffen.' And, Bert, I blushed just as if he'd kissed me. And then he goes on: 'You might be asked for that key, if 'twas known you had it. You might, I warn you, be woke up by a burglar. Now, Biffen, if you are, keep your head, and keep a civil tongue in it. Don't scream! You can tell Mr. Burglar, with my compliments, that what is left of my plate is fully insured against burglary. Give him the key, Biffen, tell him where the safe is, and invite him to help himself. You might add, as her ladyship is such a light sleeper, that we hope he will be as quiet as possible.' That's what his lordship told me, Bert; and that's why I'm not scared."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"His lordship is a very kind and thoughtful old gentleman," said Evarannie.

"And you say he's selling the family diamonds?"

"Yes. He got 'em out of the Melchester bank yesterday. They're in the funniest old case. He gave them to me to put into the safe. Nobody knows; but I had to go back to lock it. See? His lordship is away to-night, and that's why he was fussy about putting the jewellery into the safe. He'll be home along to-morrow morning, and he takes the twelve train to town."

"I wonder if the diamonds is insured?"

"I don't know. I expect so. You know what a fuss-pot my lord is; but he does trust me, Bert, same as you do, dear."

Bert kissed her, and then he coughed.

"You ain't got rid of your cough?"

"No."

"Is it bad?"

"It's nothing at all, just a tickling in the throat. Maybe I smoke too many fags. Don't you worry!"

"It's a nasty little cough," said Evarannie.

Evarannie

3

Evarannie was "in" by ten. Bert and she had talked much about life overseas, talk which need not be recorded, because it wandered round a vicious circle of ways and means. There was one way out of that circle. Bert might get work in the household of some Midland profiteer far from Evarannie. Till now, he had tried to find a "place" within cycling distance of her, but the Forest of Ys is not the less charming because few rich men live in it. What magnates there were had rigorously cut down their establishments. In most of the bigger houses parlourmaids had come to stay. They ate less food; they were paid less wages; they did more work.

To Evarannie—and who can blame her?—there was balm in the thought that Bert hated to seek work far from her. By that hatred she could measure the strength of her hold on his affections. What she could not measure was the possibility of losing him. That possibility loomed larger as the prospect of marriage became more and more remote. If, away from her, he met a younger and prettier woman—? But, oddly enough, she could bear without wincing the thought of his going to America, because she accepted artlessly his assurance that within a year he would be in a position to marry her. How long would they have to wait for marriage if he accepted a manservant's wage in England?

She was in her bedroom shortly before eleven. The butler's bedroom, not used, was next to the pantry. Near the pantry were the servants' stairs leading to their own wing of the big house. Evarannie had been given the first room on the landing, which had been occupied by Bert when he was footman. A baize door, not a dozen feet away, led to the bedrooms of the family.

Evarannie undressed, thinking of Bert. She

Leaves from Arcady

looked tenderly at the ring he had bestowed upon her when they became engaged; she kissed a small locket which held his hair; she also kissed a bit of shrapnel which had been removed from his arm at Béthune. Let it not be inferred that she was unduly sentimental. The thought of Bert in America ripened these kisses. But she had a presentiment that he would never get there. However, she distrusted presentiments, because, during the war, both she and Bert made certain, whenever he returned on leave, that they would never meet again. Nothing mattered much because they had met again.

The stable clock struck the half-hour after eleven as Evarannie got into bed. She fell sound asleep at once, as was her habit.

She awoke some time after one, so she discovered later. And she awoke with a start, conscious that she was in full possession of her faculties. Sense of hearing, indeed, seemed to be quickened. She was awake, she divined, because she had heard something in her sleep. She experienced that common and uncanny conviction that an animal—possibly a cat—was in her room. Listening intently, she heard nothing except the ticking of the wrist-watch upon the small table beside the bed.

And then a board creaked unmistakably.

Somebody *was* in the room.

Instinctively, she sat up. As she did so an electric torch blazed into her eyes, almost blinding them. A black figure—she could make that out—held the torch, surmounted by a head without a face. She decided quickly that the face was hidden by a mask.

A burglar confronted her. She was surprised to hear her own voice:

"So it's you, is it?"

The man made no reply.

"Are you Mr. Burglar?" she asked politely.

The black head bowed. At the same moment a

Evarannie

large bit of cardboard fell upon the bed. The light from the torch illuminated a few words carefully printed in large capitals :

"I WANT THE KEY OF THE SAFE. DON'T MAKE A ROW. I MEAN TO HAVE IT."

Obedient, as she had even been, to Authority, remembering little else save her master's injunction, she said in the prim voice of the well-trained servant-maid :

"His lordship told me to tell you, with his compliments, that his plate is fully insured against burglary. I will give you the key of the safe. Help yourself, and, please, make no noise, because her ladyship is a light sleeper."

She took the key from beneath her pillow and held it out. A gloved hand closed over it. The black figure moved silently towards the door. Evarannie stared at her visitor, as if fascinated. She saw him remove the key of her door. She guessed that he intended to lock her in.

Even as he bent down, a hand went to his mouth. He coughed. The cough was just audible, but it sounded in Evarannie's ears like the crack of doom, because she had heard it before.

In a jiffy she was out of bed and at his heels. Before he could turn the handle of the door her arms had gripped him.

"Bert—oh, Bert ! "

"Shush-h-h ! For God's sake ! "

Gripping him tightly, she could feel his muscles relax. Instantly, holding him with one hand, she switched on the electric light, snapping up the small brass knob close to the door.

Bert, with a gesture, removed his mask. Evarannie snatched a coverlet from the bed and huddled herself up in it.

Leaves from Arcady

4

They stared at each other without speaking. Both were trembling, but not with fright. Of the pair, perhaps Evarannie was the less distressed.

"Give me the key," she said.

He obeyed.

"Bert, dear, why have you done this thing?"

"To get you," he answered.

She led him to the bed, holding his hand. They sat down together on the edge of it.

"You were after the diamonds?" she whispered. He nodded. Her next question took him aback, because few men can follow the working of a woman's mind. Already, in imagination, she had seen him in possession of the diamonds, with the damning proof of crime upon him.

"How could you get rid of them, Bert?"

Dazed and confused, he misunderstood her. He believed for a second that she was preparing to aid and abet him. He replied simply :

"That's easy enough. I'm not the only decent chap who's been driven to this. A pal in my old company is a crook. His lay is sneaking bags at railway stations. I asked him what you've just asked me. He knows where to go. He can tell me."

"You have done this before, dear?"

"Silly question! Have I had a bob, let alone a Bradbury, in my pocket during the last four months?"

"You mean this is really the first time?"

"Course it is."

"Bert, darling Bert, will you promise me that you will never, never do it again?"

"No."

She looked at a set, sullen face. With a sigh, she dropped his hand, then she sidled off the bed, stepped to the door, and switched off the light. She came back, and put her arms about him.

Evarannie

"Why did you switch off the light?"

"Oh! Because I couldn't bear to see your face. It—it wasn't yours, Bert. I hope I shall never see it again. If I do——"

"If you do——?"

"I think it would kill me."

He remained silent, feeling the pressure of her arms. Touched to finer issues by the sweetness of her, he laid his cheek against hers and found it soft and wet.

"Evarannie——"

"Yes?"

"You shan't never see that face again, so help me God!"

Her lips quivered upon his.

They may have sat there, clinging to each other for perhaps a full minute. The curtains were drawn, the room was in darkness. Suddenly a thin streak of yellow light shone vividly beneath a door not too well hung.

Bert felt fingers upon his lips, as Evarannie whispered:

"Get under the bed, dear. It may be all right, but somebody is in the passage. Quick!"

Bert had learnt how to take cover during the war. He slipped under the bed as Evarannie slipped into it. She remembered the cardboard and the key of the safe. Both were thrust beneath her pillow.

Somebody knocked upon the door.

"Come in," said Evarannie.

Her ladyship entered, majestic in a fur-lined wrapper, and turned on the light. The coverlet which Evarannie had thrown back upon the bed was intended originally for a double bed. It served to hide Albert.

Her ladyship spoke calmly.

"Don't be frightened, Biffen! There is a man in the house. He may be a burglar. He may come here. If he does, he will have to deal with me."

Leaves from Arcady

She sat down upon Evarannie's bed, and patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"Thank you, my lady, but I'm quite all right. Are you sure that a man is in the house?"

Her voice trembled with apprehension.

"Yes."

"Oh-h-h!"

"It is clear starlight outside. I was sitting at my window. I saw a man flit across the lawn. He was making for this wing. Any burglar who knows his business could get in. I heard distinctly a noise near the scullery window. Burglars know where to go. Instantly I thought of you, you poor little thing. Let him break open the safe, if he can. I am not going to frighten the other maids. Lie still."

My lady stood up, moved to the door, opened it and listened. She closed the door and came back.

"I can hear nothing."

"If—if you were mistaken, my lady——?"

"I accept unhesitatingly the evidence of my eyes and ears."

As she spoke an urgent appeal was made upon the sense of sight. Close to the bed upon a strip of drugget lay a bit of black cloth. My lady picked it up.

Evarannie saw that it was Bert's mask.

5

Her ladyship had, probably, the defects that go with great qualities, but happily we are not concerned with them. As a young woman she had distinguished herself as a dashing rider to hounds, in middle age she was admitted (particularly by men) to be the most gracious and sensible hostess in the county, in old age (she was past seventy) it is enough to say that she had retained her courage, her sound common sense, and her gracious manners in spite of the fact that her husband's income had shrunk from a full stream into an intermittent rivulet.

Evarannie

When she perceived the mask, she sustained a very severe shock. She jumped immediately to the warrantable conviction that Evarannie was in collusion with the burglar. Probably she had let him into the house, after telling him that valuable diamonds were in the safe and his lordship absent from home. We regret to add that she had already suspected the kitchen-maid and the second housemaid, whom she described to his lordship as—baggages.

But—Evarannie!

If Evarannie were guilty—and what other hypothesis could explain this clumsily-fashioned mask in her bedroom?—her mistress could no longer take pride in perspicacity, in a knowledge of character which hitherto had never failed.

She looked frozenly at her trusted parlourmaid, who was trembling violently. Then she glanced about the room. The window curtains hung straight. No man stood behind them. He must be under the bed. She lifted the coverlet, and peeped.

“Come out of that!” she commanded.

Albert crawled out and stood up.

“Why, it’s Albert——!”

“Yes; it’s me, my lady.”

The second shock was almost as overwhelming as the first. It is possible, hardly probable, that Evarannie grasped this essential fact. But it is easier to believe that she acted upon impulse and instinct under the pressure of my lady’s tremendous indictment.

“You have broken into this house to rob—*me*?”

Evarannie jumped out of bed. Modesty clutched at no coverlet. She rushed at Albert and clasped him fiercely.

“No,” she said, “no—no! He came to see me—me, the woman he loves, the woman who loves him, the woman who would be his wife if this world weren’t so crool hard on the poor.”

My lady was too stunned to reply, but she glanced

Leaves from Arcady

from Evarannie's face to the bit of black alpaca in her hand. Evarannie read her thoughts.

"He—he put that on, because I asked him to. If he was caught in this house at night nobody would see his face. That's all."

"It's quite enough," remarked my lady dryly. "I suggest, Biffen, that you go back to your bed. Albert can leave the house at once. He—he knows his way about it. Go, man, and go quietly!"

She shook a minatory forefinger at him.

"Please go, dear," said Evarannie.

Albert opened his mouth and closed it. Discipline tells in emergencies. He had been trained from childhood to obey orders unquestionably.

He went.

6

Evarannie, not without dignity, retired to bed. My lady played with the bit of alpaca. Her thoughts, we may be sure, she kept to herself. But her first words revealed her sterling common sense.

"Where is the key of the safe?"

"Here, my lady."

"Give it to me."

Evarannie held out the key.

My lady sat down upon a stout Windsor chair. If she expected tears of repentance she was disappointed. Evarannie might have hid her face in the pillow. She didn't. She lay quiet as a mouse who sees a cat about to pounce.

"Is this the first time?"

"Me and Albert has—has *met* before."

My lady nodded austere.

"You are not—ashamed?"

"I—I'd do it again, my lady."

"Um! But *not* in my house, Biffen. You will have to leave us to-morrow. I'm sorry, but nothing else is possible for me."

"I quite understand, my lady."

Evarannie

"I wonder whether you do. I shall say nothing; the other servants must think what they please. The sooner you marry Albert the better."

Evarannie replied humbly :

"We've been saying that, my lady, both of us, for the past five years. Holy matrimony, maybe, ain't for the likes of us."

My lady's voice was softer, as she said firmly :

"His lordship will have a word with Albert. I am deeply grieved and—and disappointed. I could have sworn that you were a good girl, incapable of—of *this*. Life is cruel, as you say, to the poor and to the rich also. But I should be false to every principle I profess if I made light of what you have done. I will try to find you another place, but the truth must be told. I cannot pass you on to another mistress as—as an honest woman."

"No, my lady."

"You came to me as a young girl; you have served me very faithfully. I—I shall miss you. I believed a few minutes ago that a man was stealing my jewels. He was stealing something more precious to an old woman—my faith in you. Good night."

"Good night, my lady."

7

Her ladyship had not exaggerated when she affirmed that Albert knew his way about her house. Such knowledge had served him well when he squeezed himself through the scullery window which still displayed a broken hasp. As an emergency entrance and exit it had been used, indeed, upon other occasions. Albert knew also the habits of his late mistress. After breakfast she might be found in a small room at nine-thirty to the minute. At nine-forty-five the cook would come in for orders, and after the cook other servants and dependents would be received.

Leaves from Arcady

At nine-thirty punctually Albert skirted the front door, passed the long drawing-room, and peered through the French windows of my lady's small room. As he anticipated, my lady was sitting at her desk, bolt upright, scrutinizing house accounts.

Albert entered boldly, without knocking. To his immense surprise, my lady greeted him as if he were an expected and honoured visitor.

"I'm not surprised to see you, Albert. Sit down."

"Thank you, my lady. I'd rather stand."

"As you please."

He began hesitatingly :

"After what happened last night——"

She interrupted him.

"The less said about last night, the better. Biffen is leaving this afternoon. But that is not known yet."

"And that's why I'm here, my lady."

"You have come—I expected you—to plead for forgiveness."

"No, my lady."

"Then why are you here?"

He whispered miserably :

"I—I can't stick it. I've not slept a wink, my lady. You think Evarannie a bad girl?"

"What I think of her is irrelevant."

"She's the best girl in all the world." His voice broke; he covered his face with his hands, standing bowed before her. Immediately my lady's countenance brightened; she laid down her quill.

"You mean, you must mean, that she lied to save you?"

Triumph informed her clear tones, but Albert was far beyond taking note of that.

"I came after your diamonds, my lady. Yes; she lied, bless her, to save a dirty dog not worth saving, not worth saving. . . ." His voice died away.

"Thank God!" exclaimed my lady trenchantly.

He looked at her in amazement. Then, lamely, with many hesitations, answering many shrewd ques-

Evarannie

tions, he told his story—the sudden temptation, the innocent avowal of Evarannie that the key was to be given to any enterprising gentleman who might ask for it, and lastly the cough that had revealed him.

“Ring the bell, Albert.”

The cook appeared. It was nine-forty-five.

“Send Biffen to me.”

Evarannie came in, still wearing the grey print that was the morning livery. She glanced at her mistress and Albert. She looked terribly frightened, and yet, beneath a heaving bosom, a faithful heart may have beat the faster because she knew that truth had prevailed over lies.

“You are not leaving me, Biffen.”

“But—Albert——”

“His lordship told me, only the day before yesterday, that he intended to lend Albert enough money to take him to America, which is certainly the best place for any young man who is of the get-rich-quick stuff.”

“My lord won’t help Albert now.”

“I have just told Albert that the less said about last night the better. My lord is worried enough, as it is. I shall not impose upon him a shock that very nearly upset—*me*.”

Evarannie and Albert were speechless.

Suddenly, Albert coughed.

My lady observed whimsically :

“You must take care of that cough, Biffen.”

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

I

HABAKKUK MUCKLOW was much disturbed. A young kinsman of his, Peter John Brockley, had got into serious trouble. Old Mrs. Brockley, sorely crippled by sciatica, had asked her son to fill up the woodshed. Poor Foresters are allowed to pick up fallen wood. At the same time, picking up fallen wood, unless you happen to live some distance from the villages, is a tedious job. Probably this occurred to Peter John. However, to his mother's satisfaction and pride, Peter John, who was out of a regular job, filled up the woodshed in three days.

Unhappily, this nice lot of fuel had been gleaned, not in the Forest of Ys, but out of a wood belonging to Sir Giles Mottisfont, of Hernshaw Magna. Sir Giles might have dealt leniently and privately with a first offence. As a verderer he was much respected. He protected, even against the Crown, the Commons' rights—and his own. But this wood-pilfering was not a first offence. Before the war, Peter John had been caught with a hare in his pocket. The Bench at Puddenhurst imposed a fine. Now, he had been summoned to appear before the august tribunal for a second time and upon a more serious charge. Sir Giles said openly that "an example" must be made. The gaffers in the alehouses shook their hoary heads; and Habakkuk had an uneasy presentiment that some of his sins might be visited upon the curly head of Peter John. Large signs upon Sir Giles's property informed all and sundry

Trespassers will be Prosecuted

that trespassers would be prosecuted. Uncle, sly old sinner, laughed at such injunctions.

"They notices," he said to his cronies at the Pomfret Arms, over a tankard, "bain't worth a-settin' up. For why? I'll tell 'ee what a lawyer feller tole me when I was carryin' golf clubs for 'un. A K.C., too, whatever that means. He druv four balls out o' bounds an' into Sir Giles's field, he did. Well, he sends me into field to pick up balls, an' he gives me three coppers. Now comes along climax."

"Climax? Be that the name o' Sir Giles's ginger-yedded keeper?"

"Climax," replied Uncle, expectorating disdainfully, "be summat which ignerunce may butt up against wi'out onderstandin'. You bide in your carner, Master Gilbert, an' finish your ale. I sees Sir Giles in field, reckonin' up chances for a good hay crop; but, mind 'ee, grass were no higher 'n a tomtit. I says to the K.C. chap: 'I shall be down-scrambled by Sir Giles.' He laughs, he do, an' says: 'Fine! 'Twill be a test case,' says he. 'Now look 'ee here, my man, if that be Sir Giles hisself, an' if he kicks up a rumpus and orders you off his land, you pick up my balls. Take very careful note o' what language the ole gen'leman uses. When you has the balls, give 'un threepence for damage done an' my card.'"

Uncle paused to moisten his lips. He had the attention of every man in the snug bar. He continued:

"Well, I marches bold as brass into field and picks up they balls. Sir Giles stumps up so red as any turkey cock, an' 'twas a treat to listen to 'un. I hands over the coppers first. 'What be this?' says he. ' 'Tis for damage done,' says I. 'An' this be the gen'leman's card.' Sir Giles up and looks at card, an' then at me. 'I knows you, Habakkuk Mucklow,' he says, 'an' you knows me. You ain't heard the last o' this.' I'd ought to have left it at

Leaves from Arcady

that, as some o' you respectable old cadgers 'ud ha' done; but I allers have carried a high yed, so I answers back: 'I hopes, sir,' I says, 'that I has heard the last o' this, 'cause the fust of it don't bear repeatin', do it? '"

The memory of this incident made Uncle unhappy when he thought of Peter John coming up before the Bench. Otherwise, being a bold man, and popular with the quality, he might have gone to Sir Giles and pleaded for his kinsman.

It happened to be the time of year when Uncle made good money by carrying clubs and by instructing young ladies in the arts and crafts of playing golf at Hernshaw Magna. Generally, he would stroll home to Nether-Applewhite through the forest.

About the middle of May, he was passing a pond where moorhens and dabchicks nested. Uncle duly noted that the nests were nearer the water than usual, justifying his prediction that the season would be abnormally dry. Very little rain had fallen either in April or May.

"Be-utiful weather, to be sure," reflected Uncle.

Standing still, staring at the nestlings, his alert eye detected two figures amongst the rhododendrons across the pond. Uncle slipped behind a big fir. As he moved his feet sank softly into the carpet of pine needles. Across the pond, delicately sublimated, floated a girl's voice:

"Don't 'ee now, don't!"

Uncle recognized the voice, but the voice that replied, a man's voice, was low and inarticulate. Uncle peered through the branches. He could see the rhododendrons, nothing else. Sinking upon his hands and knees, he began to crawl round the pond, finding at last safe harbourage in a clump of willows. From this coign of vantage he could see plainly a man and a maid, and he could see quite as plainly that the man was not having his way with the maid.

Trespassers will be Prosecuted

Presently, the man laughed and walked off. The maid sat down.

"He'll come back," thought Uncle.

Presently Uncle heard a soft whistle. The girl looked up, smiling.

"The li'l baggage," murmured Uncle. He had recognized the man. However, his muscles relaxed as he noted the general behaviour of the young woman, who seemed quite able to take care of herself. Uncle began to grin, as a happy thought invaded his remarkable head. He lay low till the man marched off again, after attempting, not successfully, to kiss the girl. Uncle waited. The girl sat down again. Uncle knew her well. She lived in a tiny hamlet between Nether-Applewhite and Hernshaw Magna, not far from the Brockley cottage. Uncle respected her because she was a Forester. Her "granfer" had kept pigs in the forest. Towards the end of the war she went into service, and was now at home on a holiday.

Uncle left his harbourage and advanced noiselessly. Then he whistled, reproducing the exact note of the young man. The girl jumped up.

"Be-utiful evenin'," said Uncle.

The girl blushed.

"I seen him an' you," said Uncle. "Now, me maid, I can mind me own business, I can."

"Can you?" she asked roguishly.

Uncle laughed, being quick at the uptake. His business was that of a thatcher, a craft at which he was an expert. Ordinary thatching, of ricks, let us say, he despised. Ornamental thatching, as an industry, is moribund. Uncle preferred to earn a good living by the exercise of his lively wits. He had a spaniel that paid for more than its keep by finding golf balls in whin and heather. He could play a fair round of golf, and, in the absence of a "pro," could and did mend clubs and give lessons. He liked odd jobs at odd hours which brought him

Leaves from Arcady

into fellowship with rich and poor. Really, as he admitted with disarming candour, it was the minding of business essentially not his own that brought grist to his mill. Apparently this saucy maid knew this.

Uncle said sharply :

"What be you a-doin' here in they rosydandrons wi' a young gen'leman?"

"Is that your business, Uncle?"

"I makes everything my business, Sally. And I knows what I knows."

"I wonders what you do know, Uncle, 'bout me an' him?"

Uncle attended his parish church, and was fervent in response. He inflated a deep chest, and uplifted a large and nobly formed nose.

"You be playin' wi' fire, Sally. I give 'ee fair warnin'. 'Tis resky work. A very lively young spark he be."

"I ain't burned my fingers, Uncle. If I could trust 'ee——"

She paused, glancing at him. Woman's intuition told her that Uncle could be trusted—up to a point.

"'Tis all along o' my Peter John."

"Your Peter John? He be of kin to me."

"Aye. You learned Peter John some of his tricks, too. 'Twas your doing, as I sees it, that he got caughted in Sir Giles's woods."

"What a tale!"

"Anyways, Peter John be in trouble. Dad says more'n likely 'twill land him in gaol. Folks are throwing that up to me."

She tossed her head angrily. Uncle stroked his ample chin, peering alertly at flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Deep down in his sinful old heart he was reflecting that the young captain must not be dealt with too drastically. If this "li'l baggage" had held up an alluring finger——? He spoke pleasantly :

"Don't 'ee get miffed! I wants to help Peter

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John, but Sir Giles be tarr'bly set agen me. Gittin' catched was none o' my teachin'. I allers says, speakin' as a Forester, that if you makes no noise you won't be heard; and if you keeps out o' sight you won't be seen."

He chuckled whimsically, feeling in an ample pocket for a rabbit that wasn't there. Sally clutched his arm.

"I ain't a bad girl, Uncle. I loves Peter John, honest I do."

The face upturned to his was so free from guile and so distressed that Uncle kissed it paternally:

"There, there! I be cocky-sure o' that. But this yere mumbudgettin' wi' captains, this meetin' on the sly, is a silly sart o' game, to my notions, onless——"

"Unless——?"

"Onless ther be something in it more'n meets my eye."

"Perhaps there is."

"Then out wi' it, and I'll help 'ee wi' my ripe wisdom."

Thus adjured pretty Sally did out with the truth. Possibly she had discovered that all of us are dependent on others. And intimate knowledge of her lover may have made her realize that he, in his trouble, was incapable of saving a not altogether hopeless situation. Foresters are peculiar in many ways. Living in the great woods, children of sun and rain, getting a precarious living in a simple primitive fashion, they share with savages a strange fatalism. Because life, in a sense, is easy, they shrink from obstacles, travelling slowly along lines of least resistance. You see a gipsy taking the beaten track across a moor, not the short cut which might lead him into a bog. Peter John, after the summons had been served, sat down and grinned philosophically. Sally's plan was this. She had lured a young gentleman into the rhododendrons because she beheld in

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him a lever wherewith a very obstinate, cross-grained old gentleman might be budged from an almost impregnable position. Uncle nodded. He approved the design; he questioned the treatment.

"You be a peart maid, but too timoresome. I'll wager now that you hasn't talked to young captain 'bout Peter John."

"Not yet. He—he wanted to talk about hisself. See?"

"He tried to kiss 'ee."

"And I come nigh smackin' his face, I did."

"Ah-h-h! 'Twas God A'mighty's savin' grace you didn't. That 'ud ha' madded him. You be right, Sally, in your main plan. This young gen'leman has the ear o' Sir Giles. I makes no doubt that a word from him 'ud do the trick. But 'tis ticklish work, me girl. You was minded just now to smack his face; I was minded to punch his yed, old as I be. But, Lard love 'ee! lookin' at your pretty eyes, I can't blame 'un. And this be May. I minds me when I ran loose in sap time, and, seemin'ly, our bracken do grow high a-purpose to hide lovers. When it grows yaller, it serves to bed down the beasts o' the field. But I be ramblin' in the pleasant ways o' my youth. So you smiled at 'un, did 'ee, wi' thoughts o' Peter John in your heart?"

"Yes; I did."

"I called 'ee a timoresome maid, but you was takin' chances, Sally, meetin' a man in this lonely part o' forest."

"He be a gen'leman, Uncle."

"Ah-h-h! I must smoke a pipe over this."

He filled an old briar very carefully, coaxing the tobacco into the bowl. Uncle boasted, amongst the gaffers, that he could keep one pipe going for a full hour and a half. But now he smoked carelessly, expelling vast volumes of smoke. And as he smoked he scratched his head. Sally sat still, with her hands folded upon her lap, watching a squirrel peering at

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Uncle from behind a branch. Finally, Uncle broke the silence.

"Honesty be the policy o' wisdom. You must own up, Sally. I leaves ways to your 'ooman's owdacious wits. You coaxed 'un here; you must coax 'un agen. And then, I says, out wi' the truth. Ax a sportsman to help 'ee. I bain't sartain sure in my mind that he be a sportsman. I ain't never seen 'un at top o' the hunt; but he be one of us, barn and bred i' the Forest. If you has tears on tap, let 'em flow. Ax him to be a friend. Give 'un your lil hand, not your lips. You be a sweet maid, and if he's a man he'll help 'ee. Now I must tramp home-along."

2

Peter John, as has been said, was doing nothing till haying began. And Sally was home on a holiday. But ever since he had strayed within reach of the law, Sally had puzzled him, as well she might. Such an offence as his was deemed negligible by the Brockleys and their neighbours. In far-off Georgian days many Foresters had been smugglers. Most of them, to-day, were poachers upon a small scale. The King's venison rarely tickled their palates, simply because the King's keepers were alert, if not unduly active. None the less, it was, as Peter John admitted to himself, a shameful thing to be "caught." It would be a still more shameful thing to be sent to gaol. Sally, probably, shared the common view about that.

To make matters worse, he and Sally were not actually engaged. There had been no formal plighting of troth. Each had set, perhaps, an inordinate value upon independence, so dear to all Foresters. He had "courted" her for years. He had been sure that sooner or later they would settle down in some cottage, very hard to come by in post-war days. Marriage, in rural districts, is far less exciting than

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courtship. To the women it means service without wages; to the men it means harder service with the wages handed over to the woman on Saturday night.

Ultimately, Peter John ambled to the conclusion that his Sally was waiting to see what would happen when he was haled before the bench. Sir Giles, as prosecutor, would not sit upon it. But the other magistrates would be influenced by him. And Peter John was aware that gentlemen, accustomed to live at ease before the war, had become, as he put it, "wonnerful peevish" under the yoke of tax and super-tax. By them, at any rate, he was regarded as a thief, a rascal who had stolen something quite as valuable as coal. The village constable said lugubriously :

"'Tis more than petty larceny, my man."

Peter John did not take in at once the full meaning of this cryptic statement. When it dawned upon him that his offence might be deemed so heinous that it lay beyond the jurisdiction of the bench, his soul sickened within him. If Sally knew that——!

Sally, of course, had she been the heroine of a popular film play, would have hastened to her lover, embraced him tenderly, and assured him, in a passion of tears, that she was his for eternity, even if hanging were his portion. Being a Forester, she was more concerned in pulling strings that might lead to the summons being withdrawn. Also, she knew her Peter John. He would not countenance any tampering with captains. Sally, therefore, was constrained to work "on her own," and, fortified by the sage counsel of Uncle, she went her way joyously.

Peter John was not of a suspicious nature, but Sally's charms of mind and person obsessed and distressed him. Many likely young fellows had fluttered about this honey-pot. Their activities noticeably diminished when Peter John loomed into sight, squaring his broad shoulders. It was understood that "taking up" with Sally meant "taking on"

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young Brockley, not a "cushy" job. Accordingly, Sally had never excited much more than flutterings. It was hardly safe to dance with her more than twice if Peter John happened to be present.

Mazed and dazed by the bludgeonings of fortune, Peter John worked in his mother's small garden. Friends of his own sex were sympathetic when Peter John paid for their ale, but not optimistic. To his mother alone he confided his greatest trouble.

"Sally," he said, "be keepin' herself to herself."

Mrs. Brockley smiled sourly. Mothers with stout sons who contribute to their support rarely display undue warmth of affection for putative daughters-in-law. Sally, in Mrs. Brockley's considered judgment, was extravagant. To put your wages into a hat, and then get photographed in it, did not commend itself to her.

"Bit of a besom," she suggested.

"If you wasn't my mother, I'd call you a liar," said Peter John.

He bounced out of the kitchen, and hoed vigorously, attacking weeds with astonishing rancour. As he worked a missel-thrush sang to him, and—so Peter John believed—sang *at* him.

"Damned storm-cock!" he growled. He threw a stone at the bird and missed it. The bird sang on lustily. Foresters affirm that the louder song of the missel-thrush heralds rain. Peter John accepted the song metaphorically. A storm was coming up for him. But his mind dwelt upon Sally, who was keeping herself to herself. For why? Uncle could have answered that devastating question. Uncle could have told an unhappy kinsman that Sally was working out his salvation according to plan, a plan that justified a temporary coldness. How could Sally sport with captains in the shade if Peter John insisted on doing the sporting himself? To keep an ardent lover at a discreet distance became absolutely necessary.

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The missel-thrush, innocent bird, sang louder than ever.

At this moment conviction stole upon Peter John. Sally had found somebody else. Women understood women. A bit of a besom! He envisaged a broom daintily fashioned out of sweet-smelling heather sweeping up somebody else. Probably his mother knew all about it, but he was too proud to ask for details. Those he would sweep up for himself. He would play the besom. And he wouldn't be "caught." He threw down the hoe, pulled on his old coat, cocked his cap at an aggressive angle, and sauntered down the high road. It was the hour when swains released from durance vile seek their sweethearts. Sally's cottage lay at the farther end of the hamlet. Peter John matured his plans as he strode along. He intended to seek cover in some gorse bushes opposite to Sally's cottage. After tea she would slip out, if—if she were a besom!

After tea she did slip out, carrying a letter in her hand. It was not necessary to follow her, except with a sharp pair of eyes. She walked demurely as far as the letter-box, the hamlet had no post-office, popped in her letter, and went back to the cottage. Peter John hoped that the letter was for him. It wasn't. Jealousy consumed him, gnawed at his vitals. To whom could Sally be writing?

Next day, at the same hour, he stood for an hour in the gorse, but Sally, obviously, was "helping mother." He could see her flitting to and fro, carrying linen nicely bleached by the sun. He was tempted to present himself, but pride choked him.

Upon the evening of the third day patience was rewarded. Sally appeared, not in her Sunday best, but in a white skirt and sports coat, which became her slender figure admirably. Peter John had given her the sports coat, of saxe blue, made of silco. Where was she taking it?

He followed her.

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She moved lightly and so did he, but his heart grew heavier with every step, as she left the outlying cottages behind her. Still, she might be on her way to Nether-Applewhite. There is constant inter-marriage between the older families in and about the Forest of Ys. Peter John hoped that Sally might be merely "a-visitin'." But, on such formal occasions, the visitor takes a gift, some honey, a pat of butter, a pot of jam. Sally carried nothing.

Presently she turned into the forest. More, before she did so, she glanced quickly backwards. The long road stretched behind and before her. Nobody was in sight.

"She be a besom," he thought.

However, Sally stuck to a track, winding through bracken and beech trees. If she hadn't looked back, hope might have lingered longer in Peter John's breast. The track led to a keeper's cottage. Sly Sally skirted this, and when she executed the flanking movement a saxe blue sports coat turned to red in the eyes of the man who was gliding after her.

Presently she reached the pond, and sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree. Peter John hid himself in the rhododendrons.

3

The captain rode to the trysting-place. He had received a letter from Sally which puzzled him. Also, being young and optimistic, he placed upon this artless epistle an interpretation which inflamed, perhaps, his vanity more than anything else. The girl had repulsed him; now she whistled him back. He had known her ever since she wore pinafores and sucked a not too clean thumb. At the last annual flower show he had danced with Sally, who was no mean performer. Such slight attentions were paid by sprigs of quality to pretty villagers *coram populo*

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and signified nothing. And then, only a week previously, he had met Sally, who smiled sweetly at him. That, too, might mean nothing or anything. He stopped to exchange a few bantering words. Sally wanted to ask a favour, but she didn't know how to do it. She blushed, poor child! and stammered. The bold captain unhesitatingly drew the wrong conclusion from these signals of distress. And he, too, was conscious of prying eyes, for the pair had met in the middle of Hernshaw Magna. Swiftly, he proposed a meeting elsewhere; falteringly Sally consented. . . .

And now she had asked for another meeting!

A hundred yards from the pond he tied his cob to a swinging branch, lit a cigarette, assumed the smile of a conqueror, and swaggered past the clump of rhododendrons where Peter John was hiding.

Then he whistled.

Sally stood up, aflame with nervousness and blushes. Village maidens, even before they leave school, have little to learn about men. Their mothers attend to that, using very plain speech. Sally, therefore, blushed crimson because she knew well enough that the captain had been lured to the pond under false pretences. When he discovered that, probably he would be very angry, not in a mood to grant favours. Uncle, nevertheless, was right. His ripe wisdom percolated through Sally's brain cells. She must appeal, forthwith, to the chivalry of a gentleman. But the situation was intolerably difficult.

The captain, it must be admitted, was something of a fool, but he could see, plainly enough, that the pretty girl in front of him was quivering with emotion. The spot chosen was secluded; the sun shone in azure skies; soft breezes ruffled the surface of the pool. And haste is abhorrent to all who dwell in the Forest of Ys. Accordingly, he greeted the quivering maid courteously, and sat down beside her on the tree trunk, taking a limp hand in his. Sally

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left it there for the moment, as Peter John duly noted.

"I got your dear little letter," began the captain. "And I've chucked a very important engagement to come here. What do you say to that, my little Sally?"

Sally had nothing to say. She accepted the statement for what it appeared to be worth—to her. Gentlemen did have very important engagements. Her pulses fluttered; her hand trembled. She tried to withdraw it, but the captain held it prisoner.

"You didn't write much, Sally, but you made it plain that you wanted to see me again—*here*."

He emphasized the word. The selection of such a trysting-place aroused all the pleasures of anticipation. He was reflecting that Adam must have met Eve in just such another enchanted glade, beside a pool upon which lilies floated, beneath primæval trees, the sentries of Time, with nothing to disturb the exquisite silence save the drowsy hum of insects and the soft whisperings of the leaves.

"I—I did, sir. 'Tis true. I—I had a reason, sir, for wanting to see you quite alone."

"Tell me the reason," he whispered.

"I be fond o' somebody," faltered Sally.

The captain pressed her hand, moving closer to her. Peter John was not near enough to hear the duologue, but a patron of the "movies" was quick to interpret actions.

"Soft stuff," he murmured, as he stirred restlessly.

With a tremendous effort he restrained action. He was watching, fascinated, the familiar development, the protagonists of a hundred films, the villain and the maid.

"He be a trespasser," he thought.

Resentment, as yet, had not obliterated elemental common sense. Had the man in front of him been of his own class he would have slunk away,

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grievously mortified, but recognizing the right of any young woman not definitely engaged to change her mind. More, realizing miserably that his Sally was a "besom," the preconceived idea, inculcated by films of the baser sort, asserted itself. He could behold Sally as the village maid in the toils of the titled blackguard.

Sally continued breathlessly :

"I be fair desperate."

"Tell me, you dear little thing, tell me ! Don't be afraid ! "

He told himself, with an inward chuckle, that he was sipping delightfully the rarest vintage brewed by Cupid. Encouraged by his kindly words, Sally went on :

"I just feels that I would do anything, anything—for *him*."

The captain said admiringly :

"By Jove ! I believe you would."

At another time, in another place, Sally, when speaking to the quality, would have expressed herself mincingly, avoiding the Doric of the Forest. But she was far too moved to pick her phrases, or mind her grammar. Suddenly she tried a fresh tack, sailing boldly into the wind.

"You was allers nice to me."

"Was I ? "

"Aye—allers a pleasant word and a smile. An' that do embolden me ; yes, it do. An' you'll go on bein' nice to me, won't you ? "

She lifted a pleading face to his.

"You needn't worry about that, Sally."

"I wants you to do something for me."

"Carry on ! "

"You knows Peter John Brockley who lives t'other end of our village ? " The captain nodded. We can hardly blame him for not making four out of two and two, because as yet he had never seen Peter John and Sally together as a pair. Sally,

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wound up to full explanation, hurried on : "Him as was summonsed for pickin' up wood belongin' to Sir Giles. Constable says 'tis more'n petty larceny. It may mean Assizes. An' Sir Giles be fair set on makin' a sample o' Peter John. 'Twill kill old Mrs. Brockley."

"What do you want me to do?"

"If so be as you'd speak a word for Peter John to Sir Giles. I knows 'tis a gert favour, but gaol—oh, dear!"

Tears filled her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. The captain, not insensible to beauty in distress, pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve, and dabbed gently Sally's eyes.

"Young Brockley won't go to gaol. A fine will be imposed, nothing more."

"Constable says 'tis Assizes for Peter John, if summons bain't withdrawn, 'cause—cause, afore the war, he was had up for poachin'. They found a hare on him. Peter John said he didn't know how it comed there. He allers was free wi' his jokes. Anyways, he got off wi' a fine. Now, look 'ee, he can't plead first offence, an' there be a conviction against 'un."

The captain whistled. He was not a justice of the peace, and he knew nothing of the majesty of the law, but he divined that young Brockley was in a tight place. Probably Sally and the constable stated a fact. If the summons were not withdrawn, Peter John might find himself in the dock at Melchester. Possibly, so he reflected, Peter John might be of kin to Sally, which would account for her interest in him.

"Are you a cousin of his?"

"No."

"Then why do you plead for him so—so eloquently?"

She answered with belated directness :

"'Cause I love him."

The captain jumped up.

Allowances may be made for him, except by the

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unco guid. He felt and looked like a fool. But he might have swallowed a bitter dose without grimacing. Futile wrath glowered in eyes set too close together.

"You damned little humbug!"

Sally winced, covering her face with trembling fingers. She had shot her bolt. Apparently, it had missed the mark. Very miserably she told herself that the crushing indictment was true. She had humbugged the captain. And he looked a fool even to her.

"Do forgive me," she wailed.

Peter John, in the rhododendrons, wondered what had happened. Obviously a pair of lovers had quarrelled. Not an illuminating word had reached him. He could see Sally sobbing piteously, and the captain, tall and erect, glaring down at her.

The captain's expression changed as Sally looked up at him, beseechingly. Certainly she was distractingly pretty. And she had asked him to be "nice" to her. More, it looked as if she were terribly distressed because he had sworn at her.

"Sally——?"

"Yes, sir."

"If I promise to say a word for young Brockley, will you give me a kiss?"

Sally hesitated. Unfortunately she blushed. To save Peter John she would have kissed an orang-outang. She jumped up.

"If I give 'ee a kiss, just a li'l 'un, you'll speak up for 'un?"

"That is understood."

Gallantly, she approached him. A du Guesclin, had he asked for such a kiss, would have accepted it in the spirit with which it was proffered. The captain was no perfect knight. Possibly, he had not been kicked hard enough at Eton. He seized Sally in his arms, and kissed her violently.

Peter John slipped out of the rhododendrons.

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4

Sally was the first to see him, as he strode across the glade. Instantly she yelped. The verb is used to describe the cry of an animal. Sally yelped because she was frightened. The captain had frightened her. In another moment, half-choked by the pressure of his arms, she might have screamed. The yelp indicated dismay quite as much as fear.

The captain released her and confronted a Peter John still hypnotized, so to speak, by the preconceived idea. In picture plays the hero always advances upon the villain and smites him. That was Peter John's idea. To smite——!

Nor did he invite the captain, in the chaste language of the novelette, to "put up his hands." The captain did that instinctively. Peter John smote. The captain, no novice, countered him full on the nose. Peter John staggered back. Sally stared at the men in horror. Peter John advanced more warily. He was really a fighter, whereas the captain, at best, was a second-rate boxer. Young Brockley could take punishment—to use the language of the ring—like a glutton. Regardless of consequences, he intended to knock out the captain. He accomplished this fairly easy task in less than two minutes. Having knocked out his antagonist, he bent down, lifted up an almost unconscious body, and dropped it into the pond!

At this interesting moment Uncle appeared on the scene. The long arm of coincidence had not wrenched him from the Pomfret Arms. Before he parted from Sally upon the afternoon when his ripe wisdom had inundated that young woman, he learnt from her that she meant to write to the captain. He had, indeed, urged her to ask her favour in that letter. Wisely or otherwise, Sally distrusted her spelling. Uncle never argued with an obstinate female. He contented himself with finding out when and where the contemplated meeting would take place, and he

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decided, not being sure of the captain, that he would assist if, haply, assistance were needed.

His honest face indicated pleasure. He had enjoyed the fight, but he knew that the pond was deep and full of weeds.

"Lard love 'ee," said he to Peter John, "that was an unliftin' scrap, but can the young gen'leman swim?"

"I hopes not," replied Peter John.

The captain was floundering amongst the lilies.

"He be drowndin'!" exclaimed Sally.

"He be caught i' the weeds," declared Uncle. "We must fish 'un out."

The captain was fished out, a bedraggled and exhausted object. Peter John said to Sally:

"You can kiss 'un now, if you've a mind to."

"I done it for you, Pete."

"What you say?"

Sally explained. Uncle was rendering first aid to the captain, but he could hear what passed between the lovers. He scraped mud and weeds from the young gentleman and propped him up with his back against the tree trunk. The captain gasped and groaned, hardly conscious of Uncle's ministrations.

"You be a dodgasted fool," said Uncle, turning from the villain to the hero. "Me an' Sally was minded to help 'ee. Bein' more'n half forest hog you've helped yourself to more trouble. Your bacon fat be fairly i' the fire—an' sizzlin'."

He held up a large hand and ticked off with a minatory finger the "counts" against his kinsman.

"Fustly—poachin'. Foolish to be caughted at that! Secondly—grand larceny—foolisher still to be caughted twice. Thirdly an' lastly—assault an' battery! Six months, me lad, wi'out the option of a fine."

Peter John glanced at Sally. He, too, was not an agreeable object for a woman's eye to rest upon.

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But she gazed at him adoringly. He was her man. He had proved himself to be a man.

"I don't care a damn," he replied cheerfully.

"But I does," whimpered Sally.

Uncle filled his pipe. He was reflecting that truly great men, like himself and the Duke of Wellington, rose to heights under the pressure of emergency. He knew that he must act immediately if a lamentable situation were to be saved. He puffed at his pipe, before he delivered an ultimatum.

"You've nearly killed 'un," he said solemnly. "I leaves it to 'ee, both of 'ee, to help clean 'un. Mortal man couldn't face his brother sinners lookin' as he do this instant minute."

"He rode here," said Sally.

"Did he, now? When he comes to hisself, an' reason mounts her throne, you tell 'un to ride his horse into a bog. 'Tisn't many in the Forest 'ud ha' thought o' that, an' it's happened to better men than he be. But I reckons he won't sit any horse for two hours yet. Anyways, I leaves 'un in your tender care."

"Where be you goin', Uncle?"

"I be going, hot foot, to Sir Giles Mottisfont."

5

Sir Giles was sitting in his library, when an aged butler told him that Habakkuk Mucklow wished to see him on a matter of business.

"I can't see that old rascal. Business? What business?"

"Habakkuk did say, Sir Giles, that the business was none of his. He refused to state what it was to me."

Sir Giles nodded. As a verderer he had to listen to complaints lodged by commoners, and—to his credit let it be added—he never shirked his duties.

"Show him in."

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Uncle made a dignified entrance, but was not invited to take a chair. He respected Sir Giles because he was a Mottisfont and head of an ancient family. Sir Giles could trace filiation from John de la Mothe, knight of the shire in the reign of Henry III, to George Mott, who appears to have obtained a deed of gift to a field near Hernshaw Magna in which bubbled a fine spring spoken of in still existing charters as Mott Hys Fonte, or Fontaine. Hence we arrive, by an easy transition, to Gilles de Mottysfont, who married an heiress of the Pundle family and held a lucrative appointment under the Crown during the reign of Elizabeth. Ever since the days of George Mott the family seems to have justified its motto, *Probus et Tenax*, by acquiring as much land as possible and refusing under any circumstances to part with an acre of it.

"What can I do for you, Habakkuk?"

In his own house Sir Giles treated everybody with courtesy.

"Be—utiful weather, to be sure, Sir Giles."

"You didn't come here to talk about the weather."

"No, Sir Giles, I come to 'ee to ask for advice. You be a good friend to all commoners, and a magistrate. I might ha' gone straight to police-station in Puddenhurst, but I takes the notion to see you fust. Sir Giles, I says, never did hold wi' trespassin'."

Sir Giles eyed Uncle with mild amusement.

"We has *our* preserves," said Uncle.

"Are you alluding to jam?" asked Sir Giles, wondering whether his visitor was perfectly sober. Uncle replied portentously :

"I speaks semaphorically, Sir Giles, allers likin' a figure o' speech. Call it jam. A bit o' reel jam do, seemin'ly, describe Sally Owbridge."

"Sally Owbridge?"

"Aye. This afternoon, as never was, a young gen'leman met Sally Owbridge in they rosydandrons close to pond where we killed that notable buck six-

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teen year ago. I mind me you had a slot, Sir Giles."

But Sir Giles was not thinking of slots. He understood instantly what Uncle meant by trespassing and preserves.

"Do you come to me as a magistrate? Have you got a charge to make? What is it?"

He spoke testily. There were moments when Sir Giles told himself that he had lived too long, that he could no longer cope with changed conditions. It exasperated him beyond measure to hear that a young gentleman had been meeting pretty Sally Owbridge at all. Indeed, he was hardly thinking of Uncle, when he heard that great man's ingratiating tones.

"You was allers one to respect your own rights, Sir Giles, an' the rights o' others."

"Perfectly true."

"You be down on trespassers."

Sir Giles smiled grimly. Uncle went on, feeling his way cautiously, sensible that Sir Giles was waxing impatient and irritable.

"But you fights for us pore folk. 'Cause o' that I've made bold to come to 'ee this evenin'. A very dirty bit o' work was done down to pond not two hours ago. I lay sixpence you've kissed a pretty girl in your time, Sir Giles?"

"For the Lord's sake, man, get on with it!"

"I'll lay a crown," continued Uncle, imperturbably, "that you never kissed a girl against her will. I calls that trespassin'."

"And so it is," rapped out Sir Giles. "If little Sally Owbridge has been assaulted, I'll make the matter my business, and thank you for coming to me instead of going to the police-station. Mrs. Owbridge is one of my tenants."

"An' so be Mrs. Brockley."

"What on earth has she got to do with this?"

"I be gittin' old," murmured Uncle, "an' I has

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to tell my tale my own way, Sir Giles. There was two assaults down by pond this afternoon."

"Bless my soul! Two?"

"Aye. When li'l Sally was strugglin' wi' the young gen'leman, her own boy happened along. What, I axes you, would you ha' done, Sir Giles?"

"Knocked him down," declared Sir Giles, bristling with indignation.

"You be the right sart, Sir Giles. I'll lay a guinea you'd ha' done it too. Sally's boy man-handled 'un to rights, he did. And then he pitched 'un into pond."

"Capital. Sally's boy is a good boy. You can tell him so from me. Pitched him into the pond, did he?"

"I helped to fish 'un out. Now, Sir Giles, Sally feels, an' I feels, that the young gen'leman got his deserts. Sally's boy fit like a tiger in the Great War, an' he fit like a wild cat down by old pond."

"I'm almost sorry I wasn't there," declared Sir Giles. "Perhaps, under the circumstances, justice has been done. It may be expedient not to press the matter further."

"I knowed you'd say that," exclaimed Uncle, with enthusiasm. "An' Sally's boy, Sir Giles, knows enough to keep his mouth shut. Wi' your permission, may I speak a word for—*him*?"

"I don't know who he is, but I'd like to shake his hand."

"Ah-h-h! You knows me, Sir Giles, an' I knows you. Sally's boy be in sore trouble. He was convicted years ago for snarin' a hare, an' he not much more'n a leveret, too. Now, a summons is out agen him for fillin' up his old mother's shed wi' wood."

"Um!" said Sir Giles.

"Wi' your wood, Sir Giles. I be speakin' of an' for Peter John Brockley. What he ha' done to-day may make you, Sir Giles, go easy wi' un. We knows you didn't grudge the fallen wood. We knows

Trespassers will be Prosecuted

you respects property. But is Peter John Brockley to go to gaol, an' this young sprig o' quality to go free?"

Sir Giles stared hard at Uncle's whimsical, weather-beaten countenance.

"Sally's boy stole my wood, you say?"

"He did help hisself," murmured Uncle.

"I had forgotten the first conviction. A hare of mine was found in his pocket?"

"A sad mishap, Sir Giles."

The verderer who pressed the claims of the commoners even against the Crown, leant his head upon his hand.

"I shall see to it," he said crisply, "that the summons is withdrawn."

"I knowed you'd say that," exclaimed Uncle for the third time. "An' speakin' as man to man, I'd sooner ha' your word than the bond o' the deputy surveyor hisself. I takes leave of 'ee, Sir Giles, wi' my humble respects. Maybe—I axes it as a favour—Sir Giles Mottisfont 'll allow Habakkuk Mucklow to tell a pore man that a rich man bain't a-goin' to prosecute."

"You can tell him that, Habakkuk."

Uncle moved majestically towards the door.

"One moment. Between ourselves—the matter shall go no farther—tell me the name of this young—a—gentleman."

"I'd like to spare 'ee that, Sir Giles."

"Spare me? What the devil do you mean?"

"The young gen'leman," said Uncle slowly, edging towards the door, "is your youngest son, Captain Mottisfont."

Uncle vanished.

MOUSE OR MAN?

I

MUDDY—or Muds—broke the news to Duds, as he was sipping his second glass of port after dinner, and glancing affectionately at a large cigar not to be lighted till the last drop of a vintage wine had trickled down an appreciative throat.

Both Muds and Duds were much esteemed in the Forest of Ys. Everybody, including two Masters of Hounds, admitted that they were the Right Sort. There are so few persons left to whom this tribute can be paid, that we are content to leave it at that without going into details. It is enough to say that Duds, having made at least a "plum," had retired from business, and now rode cautiously to hounds. Muds concerned herself charmingly with modest entertainments and was a tower of strength to the parson.

They had one child, a young man of seven-and-twenty, who had done his bit during the war. He was known as Sonny.

After the war, he declared that he was fed-up with soldiering, although leaving a not too generous Service did not impose upon him the necessity of leaving also the Cavalry Club. Then he drifted in and out of Capel Court. When he drifted in (Sonny's own word), Duds remarked solemnly:

"The boy must fight his way to the front, as I did."

Duds had fought gallantly against not inconsiderable odds, beginning as clerk and ending as senior partner in a firm of importance in the Malay Peninsula. Paternal influence might have secured for

Mouse or Man?

Sonny a sound position in Singapore, but the way Muds pronounced the name was in itself a veto.

"He might as well be in Mars."

Finally, Sonny had found a job after his own heart in the Forest of Ys, a job which included hunting three days a week. He bred polo ponies, Alsatian wolfhounds, and ran a small dairy farm. The profits accrued only in Sonny's vivid imagination. He summed up the situation genially:

"I'm quite all right."

But a father who paid the bills may be pardoned for muttering to himself: "Is he?"

Muddy, with an exhaustive knowledge of her husband's character, broke her news tentatively:

"What do you think of Hazel Rorke, dear?"

"Nice little filly, sadly handicapped by a pinching sire."

Muddy nodded. Hunting and golf beguiled the leisure so honourably earned by Duds. On that account she accepted philosophically the patter of the coverside and the links.

"She is a very good girl, Henry, and so clever with her chickens."

The father of Sonny pricked a pair of shrewd ears.

"You've hit a line, Muddy, speak to it!"

"Yes. At five-thirty this afternoon Sonny asked Hazel to marry him——"

Duds gulped down what was left of the port.

"Did he?"

"That is why he is dining with the Rorkes instead of at home."

"And having a very poor dinner, my dear. The Rorkes are pinchers. She accepted him, of course."

"Yes, dear."

Duds glared at his cigar as he flung his napkin to the carpet and rose from his chair. Obviously he was disconcerted, and as obviously pulling himself together. He walked punctiliously to the door and held it open.

Leaves from Arcady

"We'll talk this over in my den."

"You have forgotten your cigar."

"Damn the cigar! I shall light a pipe."

2

Snug in an easy chair, with his favourite pipe drawing satisfactorily, Duds spoke up and out with pathetic frankness:

"We are up against it——"

"You mean the young people are?"

"No—I don't. For the moment, cut the girl out. Let us concentrate on Sonny. Our boy is a shirker."

"Oh, dear!"

"You know it—and I know it. We have hoped that he would play up and play the game, as—well, as I played it—but he hasn't. The war, somehow, left him derelict. He gives his undivided energies to having a good time. I pay for it. If he marries Hazel, I shall pay for her."

"Surely Colonel Rorke will do something?"

"Not he! A selfish old swine. Of course, what I have sweated for will come to Sonny sooner or later, but I shall do my possible," he added, "to make it later."

Muddy held her tongue till silence waxed intolerable.

"Isn't this partly our fault, Henry?"

"That is why I said we were up against it. We, I admit it, have kept the boy in cotton-wool. Let's face the facts together. What you tell me is upsetting, but good may come of it."

He spoke temperately with a faint smile which encouraged his wife to slip a soft hand into his, although she was distracted by the insistent question—are my sympathies with my son or my husband?

Duds continued, falling back upon a vocabulary acquired in business:

"Do you think the boy will work for Hazel as I worked for you?"

Mouse or Man?

"I don't know."

"Nor do I."

"He means to speak to you when he comes back from the Rorkes. I—I think—I'm not sure—that he is counting on you."

"He asked you to break this news to me?" Muds nodded. "Why couldn't he come to me himself?"

Muds smiled, and her smile, somehow, touched Duds. It reminded him that she was—and always had been—a peace-maker, a soft buffer between himself and much that was disagreeable. She murmured disarmingly:

"I—I wanted to make it easier for you, dear."

"Oh, you women——! Didn't you want to make it easier for him?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued explosively: "Has our boy no backbone? However—what's the use of idle speculation? You know, and he knows, that he can't marry a penniless girl unless I make considerable sacrifices. The hunters will have to go. We must cut down our establishment—and we're short-handed as it is. If I raise his allowance to a thousand a year, and they can't be decently comfortable on less, I ought to sell this place and live in a much smaller house. Perhaps you haven't thought of that?"

"Indeed, I have."

"You contemplate such a drastic change with equanimity?"

"If—if it makes for his happiness."

"But will it? That's the rub. Ought he to accept such sacrifices? I want to see this from every angle. Sacrifices may be a wholesomer discipline for those who make them and play the devil with others who accept them."

"How well you put things!"

Duds stroked his chin.

"Is he a man or a mouse?"

"Our son is a man."

Leaves from Arcady

"Good! Let's test him. If he wants Hazel, he will make sacrifices."

"Sacrifices——?"

"Yes. Let him cut loose from her, from us, and from this enervating forest."

"Henry——! You are not thinking of——of Singapore?"

"I am, my dear. There is a place for my boy in my old business. I have always seen to that. In two or three years Hazel can join him out there, as you joined me. That is the solution of the problem, a test for all of us." He chuckled. "Old Rorke, b' Jove, if he loves his daughter and considers her happiness, will have to stump up."

"He won't. Henry, you are so clever and I am so stupid, and Singapore is so far off. I believe that Sonny may do well here, following his own bent rather than yours. And—and everybody will say that you are a pincher, because we are so comfortably off, and we could afford to buy a wife for Sonny, if she was really and truly the right wife."

As her soft voice died away, Duds smacked his knee hard and burst into side-splitting laughter.

"Harry—don't!"

She held up a protesting hand.

"The funny side of this has just presented itself."

"There can't be a funny side."

"There is, there is. And seeing it, my dear, I see also a way out of the wood. It may be—it is—a narrow way for us. Will you tread it with me?" He chuckled and rubbed together his capable hands, glancing at her troubled face, as he went on:

"He is counting on me. I can hear him saying to Hazel: 'The governor always stumps up.' The fact that I have paid his debts establishes a precedent. Well, if you back me up, I shall surprise Master Sonny to-night. But you must stand in with me, not him. And, in my less robust moments, I have

Mouse or Man?

wondered sometimes whether Sonny was not more to you than I am. If——” He paused.

“If——”

“If, Mary, your maternal instincts have bloomed slightly at my expense, say so, and I shall govern myself accordingly. We own an undivided interest in Sonny. You are a sensible woman. If I treble the boy’s present allowance, sacrifices will be imposed on us.”

“I know.”

“And he will remain a—mouse. A man would not accept such sacrifices.”

“Tell me why you laughed, Henry. Show me your way.”

He did. In stupefied silence Muddy listened and conviction came to her that it was a way, perhaps the only way, but she didn’t laugh, because her sense of the ludicrous was in abeyance. When Duds finished, she murmured:

“This will test Hazel——”

“Of course it will.”

“I shall back you up, Henry.”

3

Muddy was in bed, but not asleep, when Sonny stiffened resolution with a whisky-and-soda thoughtfully provided by his father, who eyed the sparkling beverage with ironical interrogation.

“Jumping powder, eh? Your mother tells me that you are rushing at a black and formidable obstacle.”

Sonny protested that Hazel hardly deserved such adjectives.

“I’m speaking of marriage, my boy.”

“We shall be as happy as larks.”

“Um! Larks do their own foraging. Even I could sing as gaily as a lark if it wasn’t for the

Leaves from Arcady

weekly bills. How do you propose to support Hazel?"

Sonny replied airily :

"We're not off to Gretna Green to-morrow. Of course, it's up to you, sir, to name the happy day."

He smiled at his father, who was letting his pipe go out. Not half an hour ago, taking tender leave of Hazel, he had said reassuringly :

"The old man may cut up rough, but I stand solid with Muds. So be a lamb, and don't worry !"

Hazel, whom we shall meet soon, did not look like a lamb or feel like that frolicsome creature. Love, coming to an up-to-date maiden with startling unexpectedness, had upset her, a fact to her credit. Hitherto she had stigmatized what used to be called spooning as "sloppy." Sonny, in less than five minutes, had made her reconsider that adjective. He loved her; she loved him. That fact illuminated the darkness of the drive that approached her father's house. But she knew well enough that a fond lover was dependent upon a somewhat grim father. At the moment she was unable to see Sonny clearly as a bread-winner.

Duds laid down his pipe and sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Really, you are asking me to support you and Hazel and probably—others."

Sonny nodded, saying hastily :

"I don't suppose I shall remain a parasite for ever."

"What an optimist ! You are hoping that I shall make certain sacrifices for you. What sacrifices are you prepared to make for Hazel?"

Sonny flushed as he lit a cigarette. Duds continued imperturbably :

"I was engaged to your mother for five years. During that time I made good. She waited patiently. Would Hazel wait?"

"Of course she would."

Mouse or Man?

"Good! You say that with a conviction that pleases me. And, if necessary, you are prepared to work and wait for her?"

"Certainly."

"Good again! I'm seeing you with sharper definition. Now—prepare for a shock."

"You refuse your consent to our engagement?"

"No. It is likely that Hazel's father may do so, when he learns that I'm on the rocks."

"You——? On the r-r-rocks?"

"I shall make the shore. I mean that things might be worse. Your dear mother and I won't starve."

"Muddy knows?"

"Yes, I told her to-night. In a sense this affects you more than us. You stand exactly where I stood when I was your age and engaged to your mother. History has repeated itself. I can find you a snug billet in Singapore. You are more fortunate than I was, for I had to contribute something to the support of your grandmother. You won't have to support—*me*."

Sonny—can we blame him?—replenished an empty glass. Then he opened his mouth—and closed it. Words failed him. With a desperate effort he stammered out:

"I—I'm most awfully s-s-sorry, s-s-sir. Of course I'll go to Singapore."

"Thanks. We'll face the music to-morrow, after breakfast. There'll be a lot of yapping in this village. Good night."

Sonny held out his hand, and was amazed at the vigour of his father's grip.

"Why shouldn't my son win through on his own?"

Sonny nodded and reeled from the room. As the heavy door slammed behind his graceful figure Duds muttered to himself:

"Is he a man—or a mouse?"

Within three days it became known in the Forest of Ys that Henry Forsyth had sustained bludgeonings at the hands of Fortune. Sound pre-war investments—so it was whispered—had gone agley. Sonny had an interview with Colonel Rorke—short and indecisive.

"Can you support my daughter?"

"No, sir."

"Then why the deuce did you ask the girl to marry you?"

"I was under the impression that my father was in easier circumstances."

"Well, my boy, trying to make omelets without eggs is asking for trouble. Hazel is an independent young lady, but not financially so. The sooner this entanglement is disentangled the better. That is my last word."

Hazel, however, confronted whistling winds valiantly. And it must be recorded that Sonny, when he kissed her, felt much heartened. She said calmly:

"We must work and wait."

"We——?"

"I intend to make money with my Rhode Island Reds. Together we shall pull through."

"But is it quite fair on you, darling?"

"If you raise that question seriously, it isn't. Our happiness will be the greater if we earn it. Surely you don't think that I'm a fair-weather lover?"

"I think you're a blessed marvel."

This uplifting talk was repeated to Muds, who lost no time in telling Duds.

"I think we can be proud of both of them, Henry."

"I am marking time," replied Duds gravely. But, his eyes twinkled when sundry letters of condolence reached him.

Mouse or Man?

"Let me read you," said he, "some amusing obituary notices."

Sonny, in the patter of Capel Court, remarked sorrowfully:

"The poor old chap is being hammered."

5

It is a fact, overlooked by students of sociology, that any attempt to twist the lives of others invariably reacts twistingly upon the twisters. Duds had an uncle with whom he was not upon the best of terms, a crabbed old bachelor who collected Toby jugs, and boasted that he limited personal expenses to two pounds a day. Sonny hardly knew this eccentric gentleman. Once, when a Fifth Form boy at Eton, he had received from him a tip of five shillings! Later on, after leaving Eton, Sonny had paid a visit to his great-uncle. They shared at luncheon some bread and butter and a small bottle of pickled anchovies. Despite this frugal fare, Sonny remained sunny; but his uncle, looking exactly like a hermit crab, asked sharply:

"Are you in a hole, boy?"

"In a hole—no."

"Did your father tell you to look me up?"

"I came on my own."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to see my grandfather's brother."

This statement was accepted in silence. Sonny, when he took leave, quite understood that he was not expected to call again. When he told Duds of what had passed, this comment was provoked:

"I'll lay a thousand to three that you've cooked a pup-dog's chance of being a beneficiary under your great-uncle's will. He never had much, and what he has is probably sunk in an annuity. It was just like him to suppose that you were sucking up."

Leaves from Arcady

"But I wasn't."

"All his life he has thought the worst of everybody. You leave the old badger in his earth."

Sonny accepted this advice.

Judge now of his surprise when the family lawyers wrote to tell him that his great-uncle was dead, and that he had left twenty thousand pounds unreservedly to his great-nephew. This momentous information reached the young man at breakfast. Nearly choking, he sputtered out :

"Uncle Augustus has left me twenty thousand pounds."

Duds was not aware that Uncle Augustus was dead. Apparently the old man, eccentric to the end, had died and been cremated without his few relatives being apprised of the fact. The Toby jugs were bequeathed to the nation. Duds, after perusing the lawyer's letter, said dryly :

"You've got the twenty thou right enough."

6

Immediately after breakfast Sonny rushed away to tell Hazel the tremendous news. Muds and Duds were left alone. Duds spoke first :

"We are in the cart, Mary."

"Yes, Henry."

"You take it coolly ! "

"I can't help thinking of dear Sonny."

"We have made ourselves ridiculous to no purpose. The boy will marry Hazel. He'll remain a mouse. And we—well, the Forest will never let us hear the end of this."

"Not if it hears the beginning."

"What do you mean ? "

"If Sonny marries, what do we want with this big house? I should be much happier with fewer servants. You are not as keen on hunting as you

Mouse or Man?

used to be. As to entertaining—shall we want to entertain some of our fair-weather friends? ”

Duds nodded portentously, but he growled out :

“We are wandering in a vicious circle. Damn Uncle Augustus! ”

“Henry! ”

“He’s my uncle, not yours. He did this to annoy me.”

“Then you mustn’t be annoyed.”

“Tchah! I am annoyed that my boy’s will to win has been atrophied.”

“It’s time for me to see Cook, and for you to see Buston. Please tell him that he ought to send in the peas when they are young and soft.”

“Yes, yes; I’ll deal faithfully with Buston this morning.”

7

Meanwhile, Sonny was learning something about women from Hazel. Luck stood stoutly by him. He found Hazel with the Rhode Island Reds whom she regarded as a source of revenue. They sought together the seclusion of a shrubbery.

“We can marry when we like.”

“Sonny! ”

“It’s a sitter. It means twelve hundred a year.”

“How wonderful! ”

“Isn’t it? I can think of nothing else. In the very nick of time, what? ”

“Ye-es.”

“Why you seem doubtful about it. You are frowning instead of smiling.”

“I’m thinking,” said Hazel.

“What about, my darling? ”

“About your—people.”

“It was a fair knock-out to them. I left ’em staring at each other. They never congratulated me. Not a blinkin’ word! ”

Leaves from Arcady

"Perhaps your father was thinking that his uncle ought to have left the twenty thousand to him."

"Duds never expected that."

"Still, from what you tell me, he is the next of kin."

"I suppose he is; but what about it?"

"Only this. You owe everything to him, don't you? Now, just as this bit of good luck has come to you, bad luck has come to him."

Sonny stared at her.

"I—I hadn't thought of that."

"I'm sure you hadn't."

"You—you mean that I ought to hand this oof over?"

"That's for you to decide."

"But, Hazel, what would you do in my place? To me this bit of luck means *you*; to you it means—*me*. Have you got it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well——?"

She answered slowly, not trying to pick her words, but picking her way through conflicting interests to a right conclusion.

"I want to marry a man, Sonny. I am not quite sure that I was altogether yours till you told me that you meant to fight for me. Then I felt that I could fight for you. If you take this money I am not as certain as you are that it has come in the nick of time."

He hesitated—only for an instant. Then he caught her to him.

"*You are the goods. I will fight for you.*"

He returned to his father's house before noon. Having dealt faithfully with Buston, Duds had dealt quite as faithfully with himself. Whatever happened ridicule should not be his portion. He had told

Mouse or Man?

Muds that elderly wits might be sharpened by travel. He was chuckling when he said :

"We'll go round the world, Mary ! Take a year off ! "

"I—I might be wanted before then."

"Bless me ! You women always live in the future. At the end of a year my fortunes will have mended. We won't sell this place, but let it. No difficulty about that. The horses can be sold ! "

To this and much more Muds smilingly consented. Indeed, she was the first to point out that Providence, acting inscrutably as usual, had, in point of fact, led them out of the wood. She concluded on a high note :

"Say what you like, Henry, but you know in your heart that Sonny is not likely to succeed in the rubber business as you did. He and Hazel will work together on a farm, and take prizes at shows. I don't think you can dominate their lives, dear."

"I'm quite sure I can't now."

Accordingly, it came to pass that before Sonny "took the stage again," his masterful father had resigned himself comfortably to what he called the inevitable ; and he was working out an itinerary when Sonny burst into the den. At sight of his son's beaming face, he asked a question :

"What did old Rorke say ? "

"He hasn't said anything yet. Look here, Duds, Hazel and I think alike about this. She thought of *you* first. Don't forget that ! But when the little darling gave me a lead, I followed like a shot. You, not I, ought to have this money. I shall turn it over to you. Don't let's jaw about it. My mind is made up. I'm going to Singapore. Muds and you have played the game with me. I propose to play the game with you."

"This is too much," said Duds thickly.

Sonny, like his mother, ended upon D in Alt.

"Between ourselves, Duds, Hazel feels so

Leaves from Arcady

strongly about this—and she's right, bless her!—that I swear I don't think she'd have me with this oof. Without it, she's mine for ever and ever."

Duds drew himself up, eyeing Sonny with approval.

"You're a corking good boy. Now—find your mother! Don't tell her what you have told me! Ask her to come here. Off with you!"

He pushed Sonny from the room, and sank, gasping, into a chair. Filling a pipe with trembling fingers, he muttered to himself:

"No mouse could have done it."

9

When Muds heard the story she laughed. Duds expected tears and said so.

"You see," she explained, "I was quite sure that Sonny wasn't a mouse. Let us own up, Henry, let the affair end, as it ought, in honest laughter."

"Bide a wee," growled Duds. "I have an idea that old Rorke will come barging in here. If there's going to be laughing over this, I mean to have the first laugh, if not the last."

Then he kissed his faithful partner and smiled at her.

"Mary, what's best in the boy comes from you."

"No, no; but what is best in Hazel does not come from the colonel."

"Not a word, my dear, till he weighs in."

Next day the colonel appeared, purple in the face with righteous indignation. Duds received him courteously.

"Is this true what my girl tells me?"

Duds sparred for an opening.

"What has your girl told you?"

"Something, sir, which I, for one, refuse to believe. That's why I'm here."

Mouse or Man?

"Pray sit down. Can I offer you a cooler?"

The colonel refused refreshment. He went on explosively:

"My girl tells me that your boy has come into a legacy of twenty thousand pounds."

"He has."

"That sum would justify me in consenting to their marriage."

"I quite understand. It is almost enough to support the young people without assistance from you."

"That's as may be. It appears, however, that your boy has offered this large amount of money to you, and that you have accepted it."

"Temporarily—yes. Your daughter, I believe, agrees that my boy should help me."

"They are two quixotic young fools, sacrificing their own happiness."

"Um! You are very frank. May I be as frank with you?"

"Certainly."

"What sacrifices are you prepared to make to secure Hazel's happiness? I have allowed Sonny three hundred a year since he left the army. If he kept this legacy instead of handing it over to me, as he insists on doing, I should be justified in withdrawing his allowance, wouldn't I?"

"Of course."

"What do you allow your daughter?"

"A hundred a year."

"And her board and lodging comes to another hundred at least?" The colonel grunted something. "I can secure a billet for my boy in Singapore, thanks to my influence with my late partners, which will bring him in another three hundred. If you double what Hazel costs you, and sacrifice two hundred a year, the young people can marry to-morrow with an assured income of one thousand. I married on less."

"So did I."

Leaves from Arcady

The veterans stared at each other. Duds said meaningly:

"My horses are going to be sold. I shall let this house. We are all of us—overhoused."

The colonel wiped his forehead with a large silk bandana.

"You are putting it across me."

"Candidly, I am not thinking of myself or you."

"Tchah! You are taking twenty thousand pounds which isn't yours."

"I am only taking it to save a critical situation."

"A situation for which you are responsible."

"Not entirely. However, let us leave this legacy, not yet paid, out of the question. Sooner or later, it will come to my son. I am proud of him. And you ought to be proud of your daughter. The young people mean to work and wait. But they needn't wait too long if you help. Will you?"

"You will guarantee six hundred a year if I pledge myself to find four?"

"Yes. I will guarantee not less than six hundred a year—and possibly more. The legacy can be left in trust, tied up securely, so that eventually it comes to my boy. What say you?"

The colonel moistened his lips with his tongue; he glanced about him. He confessed afterwards to his wife that Duds had been too much for him. After a pause, he exclaimed:

"Done!"

A "cooler" was offered and accepted.

Sonny did not go to Singapore.

SCANDALOUS ANN

I

I MADE her acquaintance when she was about fourteen, a spindle-shanked, freckled slip of a girl called upon by Fate and her father to "mother" half a dozen younger brothers and sisters. Saint Michael had bestowed upon Ann Misselbrook a captivating and disarming smile—not much else in the way of looks. Still, the smile sufficed. Her father was a farm labourer, working, like so many Foresters, at many jobs in many places. Her mother had been in service before she married, a clean, hard-working, respectable woman, able and willing to make sixpence do duty as a shilling. It will remain a mystery why such women die generally at a moment when they can least be spared.

Ann stepped into her mother's shoes.

The Misselbrook cottage is at Hernshaw Parva, not far from the golf course, and two of Ann's brothers carried clubs for me. From them I learned about Ann and her multifarious activities. I met her for the first time when one of these boys fell ill. She received me in a tiny parlour and answered my questions with such self-assurance that I was impressed. Thanks to Ann, her brother lived to tell the tale of her ministrations. And, in due time, I became a friend of the family.

It was then that I heard the adjective "scandalous" applied to Ann for the first time by her father.

"The li'l besom be allers a-sweepin' an' cleanin'." I tells her 'tis scandalous—never an idle moment."

I gathered, after more talk, that Ann caused

Leaves from Arcady

tongues to wag furiously in a tiny hamlet where people, as a rule, did not overwork themselves even at jobs that were overpaid. Apparently the Misselbrooks, apart from Ann, took life easily, as our gypsies do. When I suggested to Ted Misselbrook that Ann worked too hard, he grinned at me.

"She be stubborn as never was, barn so, I reckons. Whenever I says to her: 'You slack off, my girl,' she answers up: 'I bain't happy, father, till the work be done,' an'—by Josh!—she be never done wi' work in my cottage."

Some four years later, the local doctor confirmed my conviction that Ann would slip quietly out of life, as her mother did, simply because too heavy a burden had been imposed upon too frail shoulders. When I asked Ann how she did, she replied smilingly:

"I'm not feeling very grand, thank you, sir."

Haunted by Ann's pathetic smile—and after a talk with the doctor—I tackled Ted Misselbrook. Possibly I was too outspoken. Ted's vacuous face irritated me. To make an impression upon sluggish wits I had to cut deep.

"Ted, old friend," I began, "I want to have a talk with you."

"I be allers ready for a chat, sir."

"You're a good Christian man, Ted. I see you in church every Sunday."

"Ah-h-h, well, church goin' helps to pass the time away, an', as I says to my li'l 'uns, the quality likes to see us on our bended knees thankin' the Lard for what we hasn't got."

"You've got a good daughter."

"That I has."

"But she needs a holiday."

"That she do, but holidays bain't for the likes of us."

"We will talk more about that. I want to make it plain to you that Ann will take a holiday soon—and *she won't come back.*"

Scandalous Ann

"Our li'l Ann——! Won't come back? Well, I never!"

"She will join her mother."

"God A'mighty presarve us!"

Perceiving that the poor fellow was profoundly affected I dealt with him less drastically. The doctor and I had made a plan. Ann was to be dispatched to the seaside for at least a month. Then, if her physical condition improved, she would come to me as housemaid. To this plan, Ted tremblingly and thankfully agreed, but he added with significance:

"Ann be a queer twoad. Likely as not the maid won't go. So set in her ways."

Ted was not out in his reckoning. Both the doctor and I were confounded by Ann's obstinacy and conceit.

"I be wanted over home."

"Your sister is old enough to take your place. And she is strong enough to do it, thanks to you."

Whereupon Ann conveyed to us at length that Lizzie lacked initiative and suffered from chilblains. Chilblains, so the doctor explained to me later, indicate a sluggish circulation. Ann added:

"Liz can cook nicely if she puts her mind to it."

Late for an appointment, the doctor glanced at his watch, saying brutally:

"Now, Ann, you listen to me. Whether you like it or not Liz will take your place here because you, if you don't do what we tell you, will be in your coffin."

He bustled out. Ann smiled at me.

"We all has to go sooner or later."

I riposted quickly:

"We shall see to it, Ann, that you go later."

After interminable talk, she surrendered.

2

A rejuvenated Ann returned to Hernshaw Parva. I rubbed my eyes at sight of pink cheeks and clear

Leaves from Arcady

eyes. When I congratulated her thoughtlessly, she said demurely :

"I'm strong, seemin'ly. And Lizzie, allers ready to oblige, 'll take my place with you, sir."

More arguments. Happily I prevailed, and Ann, next day, joined my modest establishment. I am not exaggerating when I affirm that within a month she became the dominating personality. We had a family joke : "Ann knows." Ann produced mislaid articles promptly on demand ; she recovered borrowed umbrellas and overcoats. She remembered to whom I had lent books. She made mental notes of my outgoings and incomings.

"Yas, last Tuesday week, you come home wet an' tired after huntin' ; you never wrote no letters. On Wednesday you wrote seventeen an' sent off two registered parcels. You went a-shootin' Thursday, an' come back wi'out the stick you sits on. . . ."

In the words of the vicar's wife—a *treasure*.

Her fellow-servants, I fear, took advantage of Ann. When the parlourmaid had her afternoon off, Ann polished the silver. On alternate Sundays Ann cooked the dinner because she discovered that I disliked a cold supper. When I said, banteringly : "Why should I keep three maids, Ann, when you can do the work of three ?" she replied gaily : "My ! Wouldn't that be nice ? I should love it."

I soon discovered that she went "over home" on her days "out," and put things "to rights" in the Misselbrook cottage. I protested mildly, and in vain. Shamelessly Ann impetrated a loan, enough to buy on the instalment plan a good sewing machine. My electric light burned too late in her bedroom. More protests were smilingly disregarded.

"I'm making the winter combies for the children." Then she added, with a faint blush : "Maybe I didn't ought to mention them to a gentleman."

I assured her that the daily press had familiarized me with such garments.

Scandalous Ann

At the end of a year she looked a different creature, and I began to wonder when the inevitable "boy" would present himself. By this time friendship between us had established itself upon an impregnable basis. Ann was quite ready to talk to me about "boys"—or any other theme of common interest. Upon her own person she was embarrassingly frank:

"Mother allers said I was be'ind the door when looks was parcelled out. With my legs what a sight I should be, to be sure, in silk stockin's. An' bein' so skinny-like, the more I took off the worse I'd look, wouldn't I?"

"You're furnishing up, Ann; you are, indeed."

"Maybe I don't look quite the awful scarecrow I did."

Presently a boy did present himself—an overgrown, half-baked lout, making inordinate demands upon Ann's pity. I could not resist saying: "Why do you walk out with *him*?"

Ann replied humorously: "Pore feller! If I didn't, who would?"

Fortunately, pity in this case did not ripen into a warmer sentiment. But I felt uneasy, because Ann, being Ann, ever ready to give more than she received, was so likely to fall a victim to importunity.

However, to my relief, Ann discarded her first boy and confided to me her reasons for doing so:

"He wants me to become engaged to him, look."

"What cheek! Still, I'm not surprised."

"I feel ever so sorry for him, but there it is."

"You are well rid of him. He could never give you a home, Ann."

To this Ann agreed, adding ingenuously: "I do think the world an' all of me own home, so comfortable. If I keep house for any man, it'll be for father."

"But Lizzie is doing that."

Leaves from Arcady

Then the disconcerting truth leaked from reluctant lips:

"Liz is engaged to a very nice young feller, a good boy. She's crazy about him, too. When Liz marries, I shall have to go back to father."

"But, Ann, it's your turn to marry first."

She smiled. Obviously this had occurred to her. At that moment, perhaps, I grasped the conviction that Ann wanted Liz to marry, because in that case she could plead the necessity of "mothering" father. The doctor, when I spoke to him, confirmed my misgivings, but admitted that Ann would have her way. Incidentally I should lose the best housemaid in the world, and Ann would lose her health and probably her life.

The situation had become dramatic.

Liz, it appeared, might marry within the year.

3

Ann, of course spent her afternoons "off" at home. My electric light went on burning in her room, because—so the parlourmaid said—Lizzie's *trousseau* had to be got together somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. Hearsay, no doubt, but credible. What follows, derived from the same source, is also hearsay, and may be taken with a pinch of salt. Lizzie's young man introduced a gentleman friend to Ann. He happened to be the booking clerk at Puddenhurst station, and, possibly, a connoisseur in smiles with an exhaustive knowledge of human nature. Railway officials are consistently courteous and kind. Alf Faraway, so I learned, passed an agreeable Sunday afternoon with Ann. To the frank amazement of Liz and all the Misselbrooks, Alf asked Ann to walk out with him. Ann bashfully consented.

So much for hearsay. We return to facts.

I met Alf. He looked what he was—the quiet,

Scandalous Ann

faithful servant of a great railway company. Ann's luck in securing such a "boy" did not astound me as it did her family, because I made sure that Alf, although he wore spectacles, peered beneath the surface of things and people. Alf had recognized, as I did, Ann's great qualities. Later on I had to dissemble my satisfaction when Ann confided to me that Alf had been jilted twice by "baggages." Alf, no doubt thinking of the future, had not been too free with his money in the present. The baggages, had they been thirty years older, might have quoted a line from a popular transpontine song:

"If you ain't got no money, honey, yo' needn't come around."

Ann herself told me that Alf had saved money. She exhorted him to go on saving it, which must have pleased him. She was quite content to walk in the Forest with him; she refused to visit the "movies." Together they attended evening church.

How I chuckled as I watched the progress of this Arcadian idyll! The beaming faces of the protagonists told me that each was desperately in love with the other.

The change came without warning. Ann's smile vanished. Her cheeks lost their colour. She moved about my house listlessly. But she went on walking out with Alf. When I asked discreet questions, she evaded them. Finally, I crossed the Rubicon of plain speech.

"There's something wrong with you, Ann. Now, no fibbing to an old friend. Out with the truth, or I'll shake it out of you."

Silence. I stared at that exasperating, impassive mask which the best of women too often assume.

"All right. I shall speak to Alf and to your father."

"Alf knows," she faltered.

"Knows what?"

The truth had to be dragged out of her with hooks

Leaves from Arcady

of interrogation. Lizzie's marriage was definitely fixed. Alf had asked Ann to become engaged. She had refused because she felt it to be her duty to keep house for her father.

To all this, and much more, I replied curtly :

"Nonsense."

"You don't know father, sir. He's so casual-like. He can't fend for himself, never could."

"But, hang it all, your happiness and Alf's happiness are at stake."

Silence——!

I ought to have shaken her, but she looked too miserable. I was up against that confounding dogged obstinacy handed down from mother to daughter in the more remote rural districts. I saw Ann clearly as a survival of the primitive housewife to whom the cares of the household are all constraining. Argument with such a one, I knew, would be futile.

Then she said with the faintest of smiles :

"Alf don't mind waiting a bit longer."

"For what?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

I could answer my own question. Ann, all her life, had lived for the pains and pleasures of the passing hour. The present so engrossed her thoughts and energies that the future loomed indistinct, unutterably remote.

I dismissed her with a tag :

"Please remember, Ann, that Heaven helps those who help themselves."

"Pa'son don't talk that way. He says that Heaven helps those who help others."

After a not too heartening talk with the doctor during a shocking game of golf, I decided to appeal to Ann's father. Probably I should have made a sad

Scandalous Ann

mess of it, because tackling Ted Misselbrook was like poking an enterprising finger into a jelly-fish. I was wondering how to get at Ted, when Heaven, acting presumably in accordance with the parson's precepts instead of mine, sent to me His minister plenipotentiary, Habakkuk Mucklow.

Uncle, like Ted, was something of a "caslety" man, and he was of distant kin to Ted. Uncle came to me to do a small job of thatching. His pay, as a master thatcher, included a tankard of ale at eleven. Over a tankard, Uncle, admittedly, was at his best, informed by a ripe philosophy which oozed out of every pore of his weather-beaten skin.

I saw Ann carry out a tankard to Uncle. The parlourmaid ought to have done it, but seeing Ann I got a glimpse of the providential finger.

Uncle, as usual, drank his ale and talked to Ann. When she tripped back to the house, I approached my thatcher.

"What d'ye think of Ann Misselbrook, Uncle?"

"Ah-h-h! A good gal is Ann. Takes after her pore mother, she do. Breed 'll soon be extink, I reckons. Ann be a rare worker."

Under pledge of secrecy I confided to Uncle Ann's case. I confess that I ended on a note of gloom.

"She'll sacrifice herself, Uncle, unless somebody interferes."

Uncle replied briskly :

"I be the man to do that."

Slightly piqued, I asked :

"How?"

Uncle's eyes twinkled.

"It comes to this, sir, if you be right. Ann be marriage-ripe, and she'll fall like a pippin into this young man's hand if so be as I"—Uncle inflated—"I fix things wi' Ted."

"So that is all you propose to tell me?"

"Yas; I've tackled bigger jobs wi' less stomach for 'em. This be a matter o' ale, sir."

Leaves from Arcady

"Really? I'll pay for the ale gladly."

Knowing Uncle's fluid capacity I spoke with enthusiasm, but doubt consumed me. It was humiliating to reflect that this old gaffer might succeed where I had failed.

"I knows Ted Misselbrook, and he knows that I knows 'un. You leave this to me, sir."

I did.

For three weeks nothing worth recording happened, and no reassuring word came from Uncle, a secret service man, like all Foresters, and a slow worker upon lines peculiarly his own. I expected from him something whimsical and was not disappointed. He came up to me at a meet of the Buck Hounds, and his cheerful grin was as warming as ginger whisky.

"My yeast be a-workin'," he observed, "but 'tis takin' more ale than I reckoned reasonable."

"Carry on," I replied recklessly, "if you use up a hogshead. Meanwhile—a hint, Uncle——!"

He shook his grizzled head.

"This be one o' they high matters o' diplunacy. Slow an' sure be my motter. Ann comes by her mulishness from Ted. Do 'ee bide a bit an' ax no questions. I be workin' by the light o' nature. Ted, wi' all his faults, is no fool. And, ondeniably, he sets gert store on my wisdom. Hounds be movin' off, an' I wishes wi' all my heart that I could foller 'en. From the way they be nosin' about a'ready, 'tis a rare scentin' marnin'."

As I touched my horse's flank with my heel, Uncle Mucklow added a last word:

"I axes for one farnight more, sir."

This talk took place in late February, but as the days lengthened so did Ann's face. When she gave

Scandalous Ann

me the customary month's notice she burst into tears. I could have sobbed with her, but I restrained myself. A month from date was the day of Lizzie's wedding and Ann's return home.

"I sympathize with you, Ann, but you are doing this deliberately from a mistaken notion of duty."

"I do love Alf; yes, I do."

"He questions that; he—he measures your powers of loving against your sense of duty. I don't blame him."

"Nor do I," wailed Ann. "But who's to cook father's victuals when Lizzie goes?"

"Can you bear to think of anybody except yourself cooking Alf's victuals?"

"Mazed an' dazed I am, as never was!"

I fired my last shot at this misguided girl:

"And who will cook your father's victuals when you join your mother?"

"God A'mighty knows that, not me."

She retired—weeping.

Nevertheless, next Sunday afternoon I saw her clinging tight upon Alfred's arm.

What followed must be set down in due sequence. To my consternation, Sarah Goggs, my cook, who had been with me fifteen years, whom I regarded as mine till I died, gave me notice. As she did so, she had the grace to blush. I had never seen her blush. It disconcerted me. She went on, almost gigglingly:

"I'm not taking another place, sir. Leastways, I mean I'm giving up service."

"But you are a strong, able-bodied woman."

"Oh, yes, sir, but it's time I settled down, isn't it?"

Settled down——!

Mark you, she was fifty-five and weighed thirteen stone.

Sarah continued triumphantly:

"I'm going to be married, sir. It's—it's a secret.

Leaves from Arcady

I can't say more. Folks around here will have their laugh, maybe, but I know what I'm doing, sir."

My own cheeks were flushed as I stammered out:

"You have my heartiest congratulations."

"Thank you kindly, sir. I have not mentioned it to the other maids."

With an effort I reminded myself that Sarah Goggs was a maid, and that hereafter no maids of fifty-five need despair. She left me to muse over what old Montaigne calls the undulancy of human nature.

I kept her secret till it leaked out automatically.

Upon the following Thursday, some two days before the expiration of Uncle's time limit, Ann came to me wreathed in smiles. She, too, was blushing!

"I thought, sir, as how you'd be pleased to hear I'm engaged to Alfred."

I nearly kissed her.

"Ah! You saw sense at last?"

"No, sir; I—I saw father."

"You mean that your father saw you, your unhappy position. Very properly, your father insisted that you should make Alfred as happy as he deserves to be."

"Oh, no, sir. Father doesn't know yet. I—I wanted to tell you first."

"Bless you, Ann! But you leave me in a pea-soup fog."

Ann partially explained.

"I saw father—*walking out*."

"Walking out——?"

"With—with a lady friend. Alf was with me. We couldn't believe our own eyes. Father's arm was half-way round her waist."

Light gleamed upon me.

"Am I to infer, Ann, that the lady's waist was larger, let us say, than yours?"

"Yes, sir."

Scandalous Ann

"And then——?"

"Me and Alf dodged behind a bush. Father never saw us. He don't know that we know—yet. We saw father kiss her. Father is a respectable man. And *she* is a respectable woman. Even if father wanted to kiss her, she wouldn't let him unless things were settled."

"Who is *she*?"

Ann replied demurely:

"I—I don't like to tell father's secret."

"Can she cook?"

The ingenuous Ann tumbled headlong into my little trap.

"That she can. Nobody knows it better than you do, sir."

I laughed, and so did Ann.

6

Uncle's draft on me for much ale was duly honoured. Let him finish the tale in his own words:

"The notion come to me when I was thatchin'. An 'ooman, if she be the right sart, thinks wi' her heart. I thinks wi' my yed, but men hereabouts mostly thinks wi' their stummicks. So I tackles Ted Misselbrook through his stummick. Yas, I put the fear o' the Lard into 'un. 'Whoever is a-goin' to fend for 'ee when Liz gets married?' I says. And he pipes up shrill as a blackbird: 'Why, my li'l Ann, to be sure.' Then I says, solemn as pa'son on Combination Wednesday: 'Don't 'ee be too sure o' li'l Ann, 'cos her matin' time be overdue.' That was number one barrel, an' it fair crumpled Ted up. Then I fires number two: 'You wants a wife more'n a darter,' I says. Ted be modest. He axes me straight: 'Why, Uncle, what young 'ooman 'd look at me?' I downs him an' all young gals wi' my wonnerful wisdom: 'Do 'ee keep off the spring

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wheat,' I says. ' There bain't any young 'oomen left in these parts; they be young ladies, damn 'em! I'll find a wife for 'ee.' "

"And you picked my cook! "

"That I did."

"The prop of my declining years! "

"God forgi' me! I was thinkin' o' li'l Ann. Yas—I played the old game wi' both of 'un. I tells Ted that Sarah Goggs were pinin' away for love of him; and I uses the same old wash wi' Sarah, but it took a fearsome lot of ale to get Ted a-sparkin'. No other man in Forest could ha' done it."

I suppose in these democratic days one must consider the happiness of the greater number. "Scandalous " Ann is also of that opinion.

A BUBBLY REPUTATION

I

"I WISH I could say 'Yes,' " sighed the maid.

"Why can't you?" asked the man.

She replied sadly:

"I—I don't know. I do like you, Ernest. And we have known each other so long. And, of course, now you are in a position to marry almost anybody in Brackenford, it is a nice compliment to me. Still——" Her voice, with its soft inflections, trailed away into a dismal silence.

"Must be another fellow?" growled Ernest.

"Indeed, *indeed* there is not."

"Maybe I've rushed you?"

"You haven't."

She smiled faintly, sensible, too sensible, that she had not been courted at excess speed. Her hand crept timidly into his.

"Can't we remain friends, dear?"

"Why, of course, Winnie. I wonder what's wrong with me?"

Winnie remained tremulously silent. Ernest had perused (his word) the famous works of a very gifted lady novelist. He tried to recall what a favourite hero did and said in moments of emergency. Ernest remembered inspiring words: "I am ready to go through hell for her. I am a straight shot, a cool shot, a dead shot."

After a pause he said solemnly:

"I would go through fire and water for you, Winnie. I'm a straight man, a cool man, and a live wire. I ain't, so to speak, a lady's man, never

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was. Maybe I'm too much of a pusher for you, dear?"

This was perilously far from the truth, so far that the maid blinked. Ernest Quaile was the most exemplary young man in Brackenford. Mothers of marriageable girls impressed this on their daughters. He attended chapel regularly; he worked hard at a good business; he had no loose habits.

Six months previously his father had left an ironmonger's shop for what is spoken of in genteel circles as "the last home." After the funeral, which was largely attended, Ernest learnt that he was, comparatively speaking, well-to-do. Everything his father possessed had been left to an only son designedly kept in ignorance of what he might inherit. Ernest earned a very modest salary as his father's assistant in the shop. From the time he was breeched he had been taught to practise economy. Long before his father's demise (Ernest's word again) the happy-go-lucky youths of Brackenford spoke of father and son as pinchers. Ernest stepped into a pincher's shoes, and, from sheer force of habit, went on pinching. He erected a cheap monument to his sire, acting under written instructions, but Brackenford didn't know that.

"Waste no money on my tomb. I shall turn in it if you do."

Ernest obeyed, not unwillingly, that voice from the Other Side.

He continued walking out with Winifred Kiddle, the haberdasher's daughter, who worked in her father's shop at the gents' counter. One day Winifred spoke of cars. James Blagg, the publican, owned a Ford car.

"I wouldn't demean myself, Winnie, by riding in a cheap car."

"Perhaps you are right about that. You could afford a good two-seater."

"And when should I have time to ride in it? On

A Bubbly Reputation

the Sabbath? 'Six days shalt thou labour and do all that thou hast to do.' That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"It is. But—on early closing days."

"Father never held with early closing. The Law-giver never mentioned early closing."

"That's perfectly true. You are a good man, Ernest, and you practise what you preach."

"I ain't flown with insolence and wine."

This quotation rose to Ernest's lips whenever he beheld James Blagg, publican and sinner, riding joyously down Avernian slopes. To the Nonconformist conscience James's ways were anathema. Winnie's father, Mr. Kiddle, the stoutest pillar of the chapel, had been the first to apply the famous line to James. But Winnie made excuses for the publican because he possessed not only a Ford car, but a disarming smile. Mrs. Kiddle observed that James subscribed handsomely to local charities.

Ernest, of course, was incapable of leading anything approximating to a riotous life. But even a young ironmonger has imagination—sometimes. He knew all about gilded vice. As the immortal Sairey Gamp said about Mr. Bailey: "The wickedness of the world was print to him." Certainly it was nothing more.

And yet——

There must be moments in the lives of the godly when they think enviously of the godless. Ernest Quaile had envied James Blagg that joy in life which would appear to be the inalienable attribute of some robust sinners. He told himself, particularly when suffering from dyspepsia, that James was "a joy-diviver." Standing outside his shop, unpacking a crate, Ernest would see James on a showy chestnut, riding to the meet. James might pull up.

"Blood, bone and action, Ernie!"

"I dessay."

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"Climb on to the old push-bike and have a day with hounds. Try the sport o' kings, my lad."

"Not this morning," Ernest would reply politely.

From the haberdasher's show window, dressed by Winnie, that young lady, so Ernest reflected, might be flattening her pretty nose against the plate glass, admiring James's straight back and his firm seat on a spirited steed.

Now, after a decent interval of mourning, he had put his fortunes to the acid test of a yea or a nay.

And the answer had been "Nay."

Winnie, so it happened, was not aware that Ernest, in desperation, was paraphrasing the words of a hero. But the words were not altogether convincing. She wondered if Ernest *would* go through fire and water for her; she admitted to herself that he was "straight" and "cool"—too cool.

But, having nothing to say, she said it.

Presently the pair parted, not without emotion on both sides.

2

Was it mere coincidence that Ernest Quaile met James Blagg upon the evening of the day when Winifred Kiddle refused firmly and kindly the hand of a prosperous ironmonger?

"Cheerio!" exclaimed the publican.

He had attended school with Ernest. And at school and afterwards Ernest had admired in James certain qualities which distinguish, and too often extinguish, men of the world.

"Good evening," replied Ernest. James dealt at his shop and paid big bills promptly. Familiarities must be suffered gladly from good customers.

"You look very like a flat tyre," said James critically.

The men happened to be alone. A bursting heart

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overflowed. Recklessly (for him) Ernest blurted out the truth.

"I've asked Winnie Kiddle to marry me."

"Gosh! *And she's accepted you!* You come along and have 'one' with me."

"She won't have me," wailed Ernest.

James looked astounded. In Brackenford a marriage between two chapel-goers who had walked out together for at least three years was regarded as a *fait accompli*.

"Why won't she have me?" asked Ernest.

"Search me," replied James, who affected transpontine humour. "I'm not a marrying man myself," he continued seriously. "Marriage ain't a link, it's a handcuff. What are you going to do about it, old bean?"

"I never felt so miserable in all my life, Jim."

James took his arm and pressed it fraternally.

"Winnie Kiddle," he said solemnly, "is a good little girl, not a dasher, but sensible."

"Sensible? You call her sensible—*now*?"

"She funks it."

"Funks marrying me. If it were you——"

"She funks," explained Mr. Blagg with assurance, "the pains and penalties of the holy state. With you, Ernie, it would be too holy. Get me?"

"No."

"My mistake. Women hanker after change. Winnie has had a dull time of it. Did you offer her any—excitements?"

"Excitements? *I* was excited."

"Excited, but not exciting. You want gingering up, old man."

"Gingering up?"

He stared blankly at Mr. Blagg, who laughed heartlessly. He had decided that Ernest Quaile couldn't be "gingered up."

Still, an attempt might be made. He gripped Ernest's arm.

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"Take my tip," he whispered confidentially. "Winnie Kiddle isn't the only pebble on your beach."

"She is. I could never love another."

"Tosh! I was in your shop yesterday. That wants gingering up, too. No novelties! Very dull line o' goods. Now, you pop up to London town. Take a squint round."

Ernest's eyes brightened. His shop was dear to him.

"I will."

"Put in two or three days. Do the big shows. And do yourself top-hole. You need bucking up. Keep away from Winnie, and carry a stiff flag. She may change her mind if she thinks you have changed yours. See?"

Very dimly Ernest saw.

3

The young men met again a fortnight later in Brackenford High Street, outside Ernest's shop. Ernest had returned from London. He had "gingered up" his shop, but not, alas! himself. Indeed, his total expenditure upon himself, including a third-class return ticket, amounted to less than three pounds in three days. He had engaged, in a Bloomsbury hotel, a small single bedroom (breakfast included) at five shillings, and he took his meals in cheap eating-houses hardly to be described as restaurants. As a Nonconformist he disapproved of "shows," but he had patronized the public galleries where admission is free.

James saluted his fellow-townsmen by punching him in the ribs. With a wink not wasted upon other members of a small community he exclaimed:

"Oh! you sly dog!"

Ernest made no reply. Really he was stunned,

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petrified with astonishment. In a jolly voice—was it raised on purpose?—James went on:

"I saw you, Ernie."

"Where?"

"In London town. You didn't see me? Shall I tell? Mum's the word, if you say so."

Ears were pricked; heads craned forward; eyes rested inquisitively upon a blushing face.

Why did he blush?

"Didn't think you had it in you," pursued James.

"You like your joke," murmured Ernest.

"Anyway," continued James genially, "I take it all back."

"What are you taking back?"

"All I've said and thought about you, old man. You're a sportsman, blowed if you ain't. Champagne! Lobsters à la American! Patty de foy-grass! And a pineapple! Harf-crown cigar, too, if I know one."

"You know too much," murmured Ernest.

"He don't deny it," exclaimed James triumphantly. "Well, old bean, I'd have chipped in, and split another bottle of the best with you, but two's company and three's trumpery."

Ernest, still blushing, opened his mouth, closed it, and walked into his shop.

Mischief had been done.

Mr. Kiddle happened to be present. As Ernest vanished the haberdasher asked a question of James:

"You saw him?"

Incredulity wrinkled Mr. Kiddle's brow.

"I saw him," said the thoughtful James.

This was true. The publican had seen Ernest in an X.Y.Z. establishment, consuming tea, bread and butter and shrimps. He was not alone. A waitress of forbidding appearance, with "no tips" indelibly printed upon a stern countenance, was handing him twopence change out of a shilling.

"What a tale!" murmured the haberdasher.

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James considered himself challenged.

"I didn't butt in, because—well, *because*——!" He winked at the listening crowd. "But I saw him right enough. Talk of a beano! I do myself to rights, but I'll take my Sam that I never, never *overdo* the thing. Not, that is to say, if I'm perfectly sober."

"Was he perfectly sober?"

"You'd better ask him. No, on second thoughts, no. If a man, once in a blue moon, takes a notion to paint Piccadilly Circus shrimp pink—is it, I ask you, our business?"

Everybody agreed that it wasn't; and everybody went home to tell his wife, with strict injunctions to hold her tongue, that Ernest Quaile drank champagne and smoked half-crown cigars in frail company.

4

Within two days the seed of idle gossip, planted in the right soil by James Blagg, had bloomed like Jack's bean-stalk. Human nature believes what it wants to believe. It tickled the fancy of Brackenford to think of Ernest Quaile as "a bit of a bird." His name lent itself to the delusion. The wits in Blagg's bar enjoyed a well-spiced dish—"Quail on toast."

Unaware that he was being toasted and roasted, the ironmonger attended, as usual, to his business. Customers came and went. Attending to them with punctilious civility, an observant man became sensible of a subtle change of manner in certain ladies, particularly those whom he held in no high esteem. Astounding as it seemed at the time, they appeared to be giving him what is vulgarly termed "the glad eye." As a new experience this was distracting and not altogether unpleasant. The assistant, rubbing his eyes with astonishment, took note of this confounding levity, but dared not comment on it to his

A Bubbly Reputation

chief. Ernest, having confidence in a chapel-goer, spoke first, under duress, hesitatingly and with constraint.

"Alfred!"

"Sir?"

"Did you notice that woman who has just left the shop without buying anything?"

"Yessir."

"I'm sure that she's no better than she should be."

"Everybody knows that."

"She winked at me in a most ungentle way."

"Yessir."

"You saw it?"

"I did."

"What does she take me for?"

"She'd like to take you for keeps, sir."

"I feel humiliated, Alf."

"I quite understand, sir."

Humiliated he may have felt, but outwardly he did not show it. On the contrary, he assumed—could he help it?—an air! He looked almost—doggy. James Blagg complimented him publicly:

"Cock-a-doodle-do!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"Come off it, Ernie! When the old 'un was alive we all know that you had to knuckle under. Now—you're on your own, able to hold your head up. I always said you were a man, although you didn't know it."

Later Ernie gazed at himself in a mirror that had reflected the dour face of his father. He noticed that his neck-tie, which he had worn at the funeral, was frayed and soiled.

He recalled to mind a "four-in-hand" which had caught his eye in Mr. Kiddle's shop. Violet was half-mourning. This particular tie was violet, with sprigs of pale lavender that suggested horseshoes. It might be described as "dressy."

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He thought he would look at it again; he feared that it might be snapped up.

Winnie greeted him demurely, but he noticed—could he be mistaken?—a change in her, a roguish sparkle in her glance, a note of interrogation.

"And how is Mr. Ernest Quaile?"

Solicitude informed a soft voice. Obviously the speaker wondered how Mr. Quaile found himself after exciting experiences.

"Same as per usual," said Ernest.

"You look well, I must say."

"I feel well. I—I dropped in to buy a tie."

Winnie dissembled, believing that Ernest was dissembling. He had dropped in, of course, to see her.

"A black tie?" she asked innocently.

"N-no. That violet tie in the window."

"For you?"

"Why not?"

"Pardon! It's a very handsome tie. Five and six. Real silk. You never have paid as much as that, have you?"

Ignoring this, Ernest said curtly:

"I'll take it."

"For London wear?"

Ernest stared hard at a guileless face. What did Winnie mean? He replied boldly:

"I want to wear it next Sunday afternoon."

Winnie was visibly impressed.

"I'm thinking of inviting a young lady to take the air with me, if the weather permits."

"Really!"

"I haven't asked her yet."

"Do I know the young lady?" asked Winnie stiffly.

"You know her much better than I do."

There was a pregnant pause. Winnie knitted her brows, as Ernest's favourite authoress put it.

"I can't think who it is."

A Bubbly Reputation

"Her name is Winifred Kiddle. She refuses to change it. That's not my fault."

Winnie smiled sweetly at him. If he were prinking on her account, she could afford to smile.

"Miss Kiddle," she murmured, "accepts your kind invitation." She added loudly, for the benefit of a lady friend at the opposite counter: "Anything else? Socks to match the tie? A handkerchief?"

"Nothing else to-day. Au reservoir!"

He paid for the tie and hurried back to his own shop.

5

Before the week was out he grasped firmly the situation. Idle words spoken in the market-place by James Blagg, which ought to have been instantly contradicted, had been accepted by Brackenford as true. Character, years of chapel-going, the most blameless of lives, an austere upbringing—these went for nothing. Godless young men slapped him on the shoulder, inviting him to subscribe to the cricket club.

He did!

He was challenged to play billiards at the United Workmen's Club. Immediately he had a confused vision of himself cutting the cloth and having to pay a heavy fine. But a man ought to play billiards on occasion. Live and learn!

He accepted the challenge.

Invitations to take a "spot" in Mr. Blagg's bar were refused. And he put from him the recurrent temptation to buy a ticket in the Derby sweepstake.

Sunday dawned—a lovely May morning, incomparably fresh. At chapel Ernest wore the new tie, which "barked" at a shabby suit of clothes. His responses, it was noticed, were not fervent. Throughout the minister's discourse he was thinking of an advertisement in a Sunday paper. Three guineas,

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cash, would purchase "Our Whitsun Holiday Coat and Pants, in Grey Tweed, perfectly tailored. Fit and Fashion Guaranteed. *Be IT.*"

Could he aspire to be—IT?

He called for Winnie at her father's house, and together they strolled into the noble Forest of Ys. Winnie was bedecked as freshly as the birches and beeches, but not in green. She wore virginal white and Saxe blue. Ernest walked delicately in pants that bagged at the knee.

They talked, as they strolled, upon subjects of no real interest to either of them. Winnie was trying to see clearly a new Ernest. Ernest, for the first time, was wondering how he did appear to Winnie.

Not at his best.

That conviction assailed him disconcertingly. But a ray of sunshine brightened his gloom. Winnie was wearing a fur stole, cheap and soiled by two years' constant use. Once the pride of her eye, it was now a source of warm mortification. Her mother had flung it across her shoulders as she was leaving the house because of a nip of east in the wind.

Sheltered from that same wind, they sat down.

"Don't let's talk politics," said Winnie brightly.

"Politics? We ain't been talking politics."

"We've been talking about things just as dull. The weather."

As she spoke she removed the stole from a pretty neck and put it behind her.

"What shall we talk about?" asked Ernest, with the air of a man who could discuss anything and everything.

"Ourselves," said Winnie.

Ernest said happily:

"If you'll talk about yourself I'll listen."

"I'm vexed with myself for being seen with you in that hateful old stole. I could see that you were passing remarks upon it by the way you looked at it not a minute ago."

A Bubbly Reputation

"I wasn't."

"Oh, Ernest! And you're always so truthful. And you never pay silly compliments."

Fired by this, Ernest said quickly:

"Never you mind your stole. I want to talk about my trousers."

"Ernest!"

"I'm ashamed of them, Win, I am indeed. Someway, till lately, I've never taken stock, so to speak, of myself."

"Oh-h-h!"

"I never thought it mattered what a man wore. Dad, of course, didn't allow me much to spend on myself. I've not been brought up to—to *spend* money."

Winnie replied pensively:

"No. You haven't spent much here, but in London——"

She paused. Ernest realized that she knew—and believed the worst. His extraordinary ignorance of women gibbered at him. If she knew, if she believed that he, Ernest Quaile, was a son of Belial, why did she come out walking with him on a Sabbath afternoon? That howled for explanation. He had never read Pope.

"Men, some to business, some to pleasure take;
But every woman is at heart a rake."

Had he read this couplet he would have denied it, although endorsing the first line. It never occurred to him (or his father) that men might make money in business and spend some of it on pleasure.

"Tell me about what you did in London," she whispered bashfully.

Ernest was no fool. He knew well enough that Winnie had refused to marry him because he had failed—incomprehensibly—to captivate her imagination. Apparently, explain it how you will, a young

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ironmonger successful in business, piously brought up, respectable, a drinker of small beer and moderate in the use of tobacco, found no favour in the eyes of a damsel who had known him intimately for many years.

Could he tell her what he had not done in London? The mere thought raised a blush. To Winnie the blush answered, but not adequately, her question.

"I—I couldn't."

Winnie smiled at him beguilingly.

"You had a good time, Ernie?"

Ernie! She had always called him Ernest. He evaded her.

"What do you call a good time?"

Winnie reflected. Gossip had dealt kindly with a maid. She had understood from her mother that young Quaile had been seen spending money, enjoying himself, seeing life as it is not lived in a staid provincial little town. It sounded incredible; but men, as her mother pointed out, would be "boys," especially when away from home.

"You had a beano, didn't you, dear?"

Ernest hesitated—only for a second. His considered judgments of Winnie were in the melting-pot. She appeared to be thirsting for exciting information. If he told her the truth the sparkle would die down in her eyes, the damask would fade from her cheek. He had never seen her so distractingly pretty, so interested in *him*.

To test her, he soared upon the wings of imagination into an empyrean that knows not truth.

"Do you blame me for having a beano?"

"Not—not if you tell me all about it."

"You had turned me down——"

Casablanca could have selected no better gambit. Immediately Winnie became, as it were, personally responsible for the beano.

"Go on," she murmured.

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It was now impossible to go back. Phrases culled from the printed page floated into Ernest's mind.

"If—if, Winnie, I tried to drown my sorrows in wine——"

"Champagne?"

"I say—wine. If I ordered with that wine costly viands, luscious fruits——"

"Lobsters? Pineapples?"

"You would have ordered—shrimps?"

"Shrimps indeed! How vulgar! I don't blame you for drinking champagne and eating lobsters and luscious fruits. Under the circumstances it is exactly what I should have done myself."

"You?"

"If I had been a gentleman, a gentleman who—who had loved and—and lost."

Winnie, it will be observed, was also a reader of the printed page. At the moment she was the heroine of her own romance.

Ernest continued:

"I do not propose to shock you, Winifred, by saying more."

The maid exhibited lively disappointment.

"You won't, dear. I—I mean that I understand. I—I'm prepared to make allowances. You are not accustomed to wine."

"I am not. Wine is a mocker. Strong drink cannot make glad an empty heart. After all, what I did in London is no concern of yours, is it?"

Winnie sniffed.

"If," he went on relentlessly, "I tried to forget myself—and you, if I behaved disgracefully, if, to-day, I am truly ashamed of what I did do in London a brief fortnight ago, what is it to you?"

Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"And if," concluded Ernest, "I had been sum-moned and given two weeks without the option of a fine, what then?"

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Winnie burst into tears and laid her head upon his shoulder. Ernest did all that was expected—and more.

6

Before nightfall he sought and found James Blagg. That shrewd judge of men and horses, beholding a rueful countenance, said sharply :

"Winnie has handed you again the frozen mit."

"No; we are engaged."

"Lord love a duck! And you still look like a flat tyre."

Ernest said in a hollow voice :

"I have won her lily hand under false pretences. I am very unhappy about it, James. I have come to you for advice."

"I'd sooner give that than anything else. Carry on!"

Ernest recited the facts. James, to his chagrin, laughed uproariously.

"You laugh! I must tell her the truth. I must be honest."

"And lose her? You propose to unpick my stitches?"

"Your stitches?"

"My stitches." James smiled complacently. "I did see you, Ernie, eating a meal that wasn't a meal. What you were having drove me to the nearest bar. Two of the best gave me a brain wave. I came back to this one-horse village with a yarn, ready-made, about you. Brackenford simply wallowed in it. That's that. Now, my lad, don't be a damned fool! You've excited Winnie. Keep it up!"

"How?"

"What are you going to spend on the ring?"

"Ten pounds. I don't grudge it."

"Spend twenty—not a penny less. Buy a car. Go it! She will go it with you, and you'll be as happy as larks."

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Ernest went his way.

As he was slipping the ring on to Winnie's finger he told her that he was buying a two-seater.

"For the honeymoon?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Where shall we go, dearest?"

"First stop, Cronmouth. Hotel Majestic."

"Ernie!"

"What shall we order for dinner, Win?"

She raised sparkling eyes to his.

"Lobsters à la Américaine?"

"Certainly."

"Pâté de foie-gras?"

"If you can think of nothing more—er—exciting."

"A pineapple. And—and champagne?"

"Champagne? Well, *of course*."

"And—afterwards——"

"Yes?"

"Afterwards I shall buy you myself a half-crown cigar."

THE EMPTY PEW

I

THE village church at Nether-Applewhite has been described as an interesting chapter in ecclesiastical architecture. Standing in a three-decker pulpit, the parson faces the main aisle, where the humbler villagers sit. A large transept to the left holds the old-fashioned pews of the gentry, and across the chancel is a sort of royal opera box belonging to the squire of the parish.

There are large pews and small pews, which—although the seats of the church are spoken of as “free”—have been occupied from time immemorial by certain families. One small pew, half-way down the ancient aisle, was used by Susan Yellam and her son Alfred. Rain or shine, in sickness and in health, Mrs. Yellam sat bolt upright in her pew Sunday after Sunday throughout the year. Alfred sat beside her. Mother and son were never known to miss a response, or to look behind them, or to fail to put something into the offertory-bag. If a stranger happened to be conducting the service, and if he was so lost to a sense of duty as to display unseemly haste, Mrs. Yellam’s voice might be heard, loud and clear, setting the proper pace. At the end of every prayer her “Amen” was accepted as a grace and benediction. Always she wore decent black, as became a woman who had buried one husband and three children. But her Easter bonnet had a touch of mauve in it.

She lived in a thatched cottage at the lower end of the straggling Melshire village, a cottage facing

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the placid Avon, beloved by spinsters who drew in water-colour, frowned upon by sanitary inspectors. The thatch, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, surmounted whitewashed walls held together by stout oak beams black as the ace of spades. Generations of Yellams had lived and died in it. Some might have lived longer—so said the sanitary inspectors—if the Avon, inconsiderate stream, had never overflowed its banks, making thereby an island of the cottage.

You will have divined that Mrs. Yellam was of the Old Guard. She presented the massive appearance of John Bull in petticoats. Her clothes were part—not the least part—of a tremendous personality. Children believed that she went to bed in her black gown. Authority exuded from every pore of her skin. One imagines that Boadicea was cast in just such a generous mould. She possessed inordinately that British cocksureness which so endears us to foreigners. Her particular views upon religion, politics, ethics and agriculture had become indurated by use. They had stood, as she informed all and sundry, the test of time and experience. The parson once observed of her that she was temperamentally incapable of detecting the defects of her great qualities. She supported the squire in all that he said or did, and, after the gracious Lady of the Manor, was the most respected woman in Nether-Applewhite.

Alfred Yellam worked hard upon a thin soil, following varying occupations according to the season of the year—hedger, ditcher, thatcher, and maker of hurdles. He was a stolid, solid chunk of a fellow, obedient to his mother, and a confirmed bachelor till he met Fancy Broomfield, who was in but not of Nether-Applewhite.

Fancy—town-bred, a daughter of Old Sarum—served the parson as parlourmaid. Mrs. Yellam described her as “peaky and spindling.” Large brown

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eyes shone wistfully out of a pale, pretty little face. Being so small and frail, she fell desperately in love with Alfred, and he, possibly, unconscious slave to the doctrine of compensation, was captivated by her delicate, attenuated charms. Mrs. Yellam accepted her son's choice, saying :

"Fancy bain't a forward wench, though town-bred. And Alferd be fair daffy wi' her. Miffed as I may well be at his choosin' a sweetheart who looks, seemin'ly, as if a puff o' wind 'd blow her bang out o' parish, I sticks to this—Alferd might ha' done worse."

The neighbour replied pleasantly :

"Your Alferd be a gert forcible man."

"'Tis true. The multiplication-table, one might say, be made for him rather than her. She do tell me that an auntie on her mother's side bore twins twice. But as to that we be all in God A'mighty's hands."

In Nether-Applewhite respectable young men and women approach the altar leisurely. Cottages have to be found for them. Each pair, in short, awaits patiently their turn. Fancy had a good place as parlourmaid to the parson; Alfred was almost unwilling to leave his mother, because she made him so comfortable. Good mothers, in our villages, make old bachelors.

When war broke out Nether-Applewhite remained perfectly calm. After the retreat from Mons one ancient said to the parson :

"Do 'ee know, zur, what we means to do with these 'ere Frenchies when we've downscrambled 'em?"

To this the parson replied solemnly :

"I dare say, Master Gilbert, we shall have to eat them."

Ultimately, about November, it began to dawn upon the village that England was at war. Squire and parson began a recruiting campaign. Many

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young fellows vanished, but not the only sons of widows.

"They don't want you, Alferd," said his mother.

"Mebbe they will," he replied.

Shortly afterwards, without any warning, he told her that he had enlisted. She accepted the fact grimly. Fancy pouted and shed tears. However, she forgave Alfred when he appeared in khaki. Next day they were photographed, arm in crook. Alfred expressed no regrets, except one. His underpinning was, possibly, better developed than his understanding. He had a leg for a kilt.

"They Seafarin' 'Ighlanders," he told Fancy, "are wonnerful grand. I'd a notion to enlist wi' 'em, yas, I had; but, seemin'ly, 'twas not to be. God A'mighty knows why."

"I prefer," said Fancy, "the Grannydeer Guards."

"I might ha' gone for an 'orse soldier, but when they told me 'twould be my duty an' pleasure to keep my 'orse cleaner than myself, I thought better on't."

When he sailed for France Fancy consulted a well-worn pack of cards. She laid them out according to a formula known only to herself, and in the presence of Mrs. Yellam, who disapproved of cards, holding the opinion that Satan had invented them. Nevertheless, she expressed interest in the result. Fancy announced triumphantly that Alfred would come back.

Mrs. Yellam nodded. Then she made a perfectly astounding declaration:

"If he don't, dearie, I shall give up church-going."

"Why, mother?"

"It's betwixt me an' you. If widows' sons be taken, and scallywags left as I wouldn't demean myself to mention, I shall just do what I say."

Fancy realized that argument would not budge Mrs. Yellam from this impregnable position.

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Some six months later word came to the mother that her son was wounded. There were no details. Mrs. Yellam accepted the fact in grim silence; Fancy wept. On the following Sunday Alfred's mother was conspicuously absent from church. The parson said to the parlourmaid: "Is Mrs. Yellam ill?"

"Not that I knows on, sir," replied Fancy.

"Well, well; no news is good news."

"Yes. That's what the men say, but it ain't a mort o' comfort to us women!"

To the solicitude and sympathy of neighbours Mrs. Yellam exhibited a disappointing indifference.

"I be just as well as never was," she remarked. "Time enough for such as me to fall sick if my Alferd don't come back."

Alfred came back convalescent, with long leave ahead of him. Upon the Sunday after his arrival Mrs. Yellam appeared again in church, and the fervour of her responses excited some comment.

"The cards told true," said Fancy.

The young people were married before Alfred went back to France. No cottage was needed. After the honeymoon Alfred brought his bride to his mother's house. When he rejoined his regiment it was understood that the two women would live together. They travelled to Southampton to see him off; they returned gripping each other's hands. After supper Fancy cleared the table, trimmed the lamp, and produced her cards. The mother watched her as trembling fingers slowly dealt out the pack. Fancy said presently:

"It's quite all right, mother. He's coming back."

"You believe that?"

"Of course I do."

"My! What a faith you do have, to be sure!"

Fancy shuffled the pack and began to deal again.

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"Leave well alone," suggested the elder woman. Fancy blushed.

"I want to try something else."

"What, child?"

"I'm wondering whether It will be a boy or a girl."

"Sinful foolishness! As if the cards could tell that!"

Fancy laughed, and dealt on. Mrs. Yellam turned her back upon the table and gazed into the fire, seeing, possibly, the shadowy forms of the children whom she had lost. The wooden cradle which had held them was in its place by the hearth full of logs. She reflected that it would serve for Alfred's child. And upstairs, in an old bureau, lay some little things—tiny shifts and frocks, with lavender between them. Once, in a moment of dull despair, she had been tempted to burn them. A kindlier thought had urged her to give them away. She put that thought from her frowningly. How often the gain of others magnifies and distorts our own loss! Some happy instinct must have constrained her to keep those garments, made by her own hands, although at the time she little recked that they might be worn, so long afterwards, by her own flesh and blood.

"Mother!"

Fancy's eager voice broke the silence.

"Well?"

"It's going to be a boy, another Alferd. Ain't you glad?"

"If the cards don't lie, I shall be glad."

3

The months passed. Each Sunday the parson prayed for the sons of the village fighting overseas. Some were dead; many were wounded. For the first

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time in the memory of the ancients the cricket pitch in the park was left unmown and unrolled. In the houses of gentle and simple economy took the place of entertainment. The beer of the gossips became small indeed. Many of the younger women drifted away into munition factories and Red Cross hospitals. Upon those left behind descended a drab pall of depression and apathy.

Finally, word came to Mrs. Yellam that her son was missing. Two days before the parson received a telegram from the War Office informing him that his second boy, Edward, had been killed in action.

Upon the next Sunday Mrs. Yellam's pew was empty.

Everybody knew that the physical condition of Alfred Yellam's wife might account for her absence, but the absence of Alfred's mother excited no reasonable explanation.

The parson called upon her. He has been sufficiently described elsewhere; it is enough to say here that he was a kindly man at heart, but austere, sparing neither himself nor others in the exercise of his parochial duties.

Mrs. Yellam received him respectfully, ushering him into the small parlour, rarely used save upon such formal occasions. She dusted a chair which had no dust on it, and begged the parson to be seated. In the kitchen, next door, Fancy was at work. The parson politely asked after her. Mrs. Yellam replied grimly:

"She'll be worse, pore soul, afore she's any better."

The parson nodded.

"Has this sad news affected her? Is she worrying very much?"

Mrs. Yellam's lips seemed thinner than usual as she snapped out:

"Oh, no; she's quite sure, she be, that Alferd'll come back."

The Empty Pew

"That is well, Mrs. Yellam; very well."

"For her, maybe."

The parson hesitated. His disability upon such occasions was a certain directness of speech, an abruptness caused, possibly, by an excess rather than a lack of sympathy and perception. As man and priest he habitually shunned those easy by-paths beloved by many of us when we have disagreeable duties to perform. He marched straight to his objectives.

"I missed you in church last Sunday," he said curtly.

"One old 'ooman ain't missed, surely?"

His eyes, not his voice, softened.

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Yellam. A woman of your character in this village is missed more than you think, perhaps."

She answered him directly and indirectly:

"If my Alferd comes back to Nether-Applewhite, you'll see me in my pew again."

"You have made such a rash bargain as that with your God?"

"I dunno as He is *my* God. The Kayser claims Him, too."

"I understand. I am very sorry. You have heard, I suppose, that I have lost a son?"

"You have three left, sir." She spoke very quietly. "And a daughter."

"If—if I left the matter there for the moment, in the firm hope and belief that God's ways—inscrutable as they may seem to us—will be in His time made manifest, may I not, as your parish priest, ask you to consider the example to others, the many, possibly, who are wavering in their faith, as—as you are?"

Mrs. Yellam's eyes met his unflinchingly. She was well aware that the parson had spoken with a sincerity that soared high above opportunity and importunity. She knew that for twenty years he had practised all that he had preached.

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"My faith ain't wavering, sir. It seems as if 'twas gone out o' winder—fluttered away like. Maybe it'll come back, shakin' its feathers; maybe—it won't. Anyways, feelin' as I do, I can't go church-along, although I'd be pleased to oblige you."

"It is no question of pleasing me, Mrs. Yellam. You are adding to your burden instead of sharing it with One Who laid it upon you and Who alone can lighten it."

The old woman made no reply. The parson asked to see his former parlourmaid. Presently she came in, nervously and awkwardly. Her face was whiter and thinner. No observant man could doubt the fact that she was suffering from suspense, weakened physically by it at a moment when a woman needs all strength of mind and body. Her hand trembled a little as the parson took it in his firm, reassuring clasp. She faltered out:

"Oh, sir, I be so grieved to hear of Master Edward. He was allers so full o' life."

"He may be more full of real life where he is now."

At that her eyes began to glow. Subtly, then, the parson's manner changed, together with the inflections of his voice. Perhaps, too, he felt more at his ease with this softer specimen of womanhood, who had served him faithfully. He was alone with her. Mrs. Yellam had gone into her garden. For a minute or two he spoke quietly of his dead son, betraying what is far more impressive than any emotion—restraint. He abandoned direct methods. He desired intensely to soothe the trembling creature shrinking from the shadows through which she must soon pass. Presently he perceived that his words took effect. His strength seemed to be infused into her. She smiled faintly at him, pathetically grateful for his concluding sentence:

"Courage and faith are demanded of us."

The Empty Pew

"Yes, sir. I believe, with all my heart, that Alferd'll surely come back."

He remained silent. The odds were so great against such an easy solution of the problem. Fancy continued:

"His mother don't think he will come back. She says a Yellam wouldn't demean 'isself by bein' taken prisoner. If he don't come back it'll fair kill her."

"Go on believing that he will come back. It will help you and her."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir."

He went his way, pausing for a moment to gaze at the old woman in the garden bending over her potato patch. She must have seen him leave the cottage, but she made no sign. The parson muttered to himself:

"Civil war—devastating civil war raging in that poor old heart!"

4

The parson returned home with his mind dwelling upon the eternal conflict between good and evil, a conflict accentuated by the war, because its issues seemed to enrich or impoverish everybody. By it, without a doubt, Mrs. Yellam had been impoverished. He himself was conscious of enrichment. Humbly, with a questioning sense of his own judgment alien to him heretofore, he had accepted Armageddon as a sacrifice exacted by Omnipotence, a sacrifice which revealed Omnipotence. He beheld a better world purged of luxury, indifference, and selfishness. That, of course, happened to be his point of view. It might, or might not, be shared by others.

After tea he walked up to the Hall and laid Mrs. Yellam's case before the gracious Lady of the Manor, who had relatives and connections in high places. With little urging she consented to "pull strings" to find out, if it were possible, what had been the fate of Alfred Yellam.

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That fate became known at a moment when birth and death—always so strangely companionable—were hovering above the Yellam cottage.

Word reached the parson—through the Lady of the Manor—that Alfred was dead and missing. He had been blown to irrecoverable bits by a shell. One man had witnessed this instant disappearance. He, too, had been struck down, cruelly wounded. For many days he had lain senseless in a receiving hospital. When he was able to tell his tale he did so.

Could such news be broken to mother or wife when the wife lay in bed with her own life and that of another in peril?

The parson decided to wait.

5

Those who knew and understood Mrs. Yellam were not surprised to hear that she had given up her best room to her son's wife. In that room her own children had been born. Fancy protested in vain. Mrs. Yellam was inflexible. Oddly enough, she had taken for granted that nothing untoward would happen. Her thoughts, indeed, were concentrated upon her missing son. Nothing else mattered—much.

When the doctor told her of complications she became obstinately incredulous. Deep down in her mind lay the not unjustifiable conviction that doctors, in their own interests, made the worst of things, because, when their patients pulled through, the greater credit attached itself to them.

She imagined also that all danger was over when the baby arrived. And, if she felt any disappointment in the fact of its sex, that disappointment was merged in a grim complacency, because the poor little mother's conviction on the point had been at fault. When she told Fancy that she had borne a girl, Alfred's wife murmured feebly:

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"The cards was wrong, wasn't they?" But she added hastily: "They was right about Alferd. He is coming back."

Three days later Mrs. Yellam went into the garden. The month was November. Heavy rains had swollen the Avon. A sharp frost had stripped the beeches of their leaves. Nevertheless, an autumnal calm lingered upon the face of the landscape. The familiar fields seemed to be asleep after the travailings of summer. Mrs. Yellam had left Fancy in just such a peaceful doze. Few persons are aware how profoundly Nature affects those who are dependent upon her. Because the tillers of the soil are, for the most part, helplessly inarticulate, it is inferred that they are indifferent.

Beneath the grey skies Mrs. Yellam stood bare-headed, thinking intently. All her life she had been perceptive of signs, that simple Arcadian lore overlooked by the dwellers in cities. Now, fiercely and intently, she wanted a particular sign, upon which she was prepared to stake what she designated as salvation.

The cards had lied about the baby. But Nature did not lie, if you knew how to interpret her. Frowns and smiles alike were unmistakable. At this moment Nature neither frowned nor smiled. Her face was inscrutable, veiled by evening mists. Mute, too, save for the voice of the river, crooning its eternal lullaby. It had risen rapidly. Before night it would encircle the cottage. The grey clouds held much water.

In the evening of the day and of the year Mrs. Yellam asked for light. At the same time she was quite certain that light would not be vouchsafed to her. She stared at the clouds even as Fancy had stared at the cards. If light shone through them she *might* believe that for her spring and summer would bloom again.

Engrossed in these thoughts, she was startled out of them by the voice of the parson. He inquired

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after Fancy and her child. Mrs. Yellam answered perfunctorily. Mother and baby were not quite as nicely as could be expected. As she spoke she saw that her visitor's austere face was troubled, and she divined his errand.

"You have news of Alferd."

"Yes."

He told what he knew, wondering at her fortitude. She agreed respectfully that it would be unwise to tell Fancy until some measure of strength had come back to her. The parson, after a glance at her, withheld such condolence as rose to his lips. He perceived that the one thing possible was to go. He took her cold hand.

"You have courage," he said. "May God give you faith also!"

She heard the wicket-gate slam, and he was gone. The rain fell upon her face, but her eyes remained dry. She turned slowly. On the threshold of her cottage she paused to look back. Such an expression of countenance may be seen sometimes by travellers upon transatlantic boats when the steerage passengers are taking leave of their native land.

And then the sign she wanted was given. Through the falling rain, from the far western horizon, shone a strange light, palely amber. It illuminated the fading landscape, evoking colour—iridescent, opaline tints—where colour had ceased to be. It transmuted, magically, the sombre lead of the swollen river into sparkling gold. And then as suddenly the light failed—the vision splendid vanished like a mirage.

Mrs. Yellam went upstairs.

She found the baby asleep and Fancy awake. Mrs. Yellam struck a match, but Fancy feebly entreated her not to light candle or lamp. At the attenuated sound of her voice the elder woman started. Till this moment she had believed that Fancy would soon be up and about again. Now

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instinct told her that this was not to be. She sat down by the bed. Fancy said, whisperingly :

"Mother."

"Yes, dear?"

"I have a feeling that Alferd is coming back to-night. It's a feeling that makes me stronger and stronger every blessed minute."

Mrs. Yellam pressed her wasted hand. How much better that Fancy should go before she knew! Was she going soon? Ought she to summon the doctor? Above her thoughts, curiously dominating them, floated Fancy's voice, a mere trickle of sound. . . .

"I am feeling, too, ever so happy. Alferd wanted a girl."

"Did he now?"

"He said that a dinky li'l' maid would traipse after you so nicely."

"I can traipse after myself, dear. I allers hev' done in my common way."

"I know you hev'. A wondersome woman you be."

"Nothin' o' that sart," muttered Mrs. Yellam. "If it comes to plain speech, which I fancy most myself, I bain't no more than a hard old flint such as I turns up when I digs in garden."

"You're wondersome," persisted Fancy. "Me and Alferd'll want baby to grow up just like you."

"God forbid!"

Fancy went slowly on expatiating upon Mrs. Yellam's great qualities. The old woman twisted in her chair. What did such talk portend? Did Fancy know that her child would be motherless? And, if so, why had she boasted of being stronger? The fact stood out that her mind was stronger. She spoke lucidly, conjuring up a vivid picture of youth ministering to age, a picture so poignant that something in Susan Yellam's heart told her that the artless tale must come true. Alfred would never come

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back. But, when her time came, she would lie in this big bed, and Alfred's child would close her eyes. The thought of that softened indurated tissues, but the original hardness remained. She turned for comfort to a flesh-and-blood grandchild; she turned as resolutely from any faith in a wise and merciful God.

Outside the rain was falling steadily. A rising wind soughed in the trees. Mrs. Yellam mended the fire, which burnt more brightly. By the light of the flames she could see a marked change in Fancy's face. It seemed a change for the better. The cheeks were pink, but not from fever. Mrs. Yellam reflected that it would be foolish to disturb the doctor on such a night. A neighbour would drop in as usual in the morning. When she lit the lamp she said decidedly :

"My! Child, but you do look pretty to-night!"

Fancy laughed.

"I hope Alferd will think so."

Once again Mrs. Yellam dissembled. Fever or no fever, Fancy had become obsessed with the conviction that Alfred was coming. She insisted upon her hair being arranged becomingly, and demanded a fresh ribbon. But it was difficult to coax her to take food.

The baby woke up, was fed, and fell asleep again in its cradle. Presently Fancy dozed off, and Mrs. Yellam crept downstairs to the kitchen to prepare her own supper. She gulped it down as a matter of principle, tidying up as usual. After such exercises it had been her custom, before Alfred was reported missing, to read a chapter of the Bible. Her eyes fell upon the Book as she came out of her scullery, where she had duly washed her hands. She took it down from its shelf, laid it open upon the kitchen-table, put on her spectacles and opened it. Upon the fly-leaf were inscribed many names. Mrs. Yellam lit a candle and fetched pen and ink from the parlour.

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With a firm hand she made the necessary entry, "Killed in action," and then slowly added the date, which the parson had given to her. She took off her spectacles. What she had willed herself to be she was—a flint embedded in sterile soil. She forgot the child upstairs. For the moment she envisaged herself—a forlorn old woman without hope here or hereafter. Really and truly she was dead. As this thought percolated through her mind she picked up the pen, dipped it in ink, and wrote "Died" opposite her name, Susan Yellam, adding the date, that same day. She waited till the ink was dry, closed the Bible, and replaced it upon its shelf.

When she went upstairs half a gale was blowing, and the roar of the Avon penetrated shut windows. Fancy and the baby were both asleep. Mrs. Yellam stood at the foot of the bed, staring at the face upon the pillow. The colour had gone from the thin cheeks. She bent down, laying her ear against the girl's bosom. The breathing was very slow and intermittent. Fancy opened her eyes.

"Has Alferd come?" she asked.

"Not yet, child. Try to go to sleep again."

"I'd sooner talk about him with you. Gracious! What a night for him to be out in!"

"Yes. I reckon we be on an island."

"Alferd won't care, not if it were never so. Hark!"

She sat up, lifting her finger. Was this a delusion of the dying? Mrs. Yellam could not think so. Awed, in spite of herself, she listened.

"I thought I heard his step."

"'Tis the rain and wind."

Fancy lay back, panting a little. Mrs. Yellam felt her flickering pulse, and persuaded her to swallow some sal volatile and water. To soothe her patient she said decidedly:

"Alferd won't come to-night, dear. Mebbe, if you drop off to sleep, you'll dream of him."

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"He'll come, because he knows how much I am wanting him."

"Anyways you shut your eyes."

"You ain't locked the front door?"

"No."

This was true. For the first time in many years Mrs. Yellam had forgotten to do so. She reflected that on such a night, encompassed by floods, two women would be left undisturbed.

Fancy obediently closed her eyes. Mrs. Yellam sat down beside the bed after making up the fire. Then she turned down the lamp. She said afterwards that she remained wideawake, with no inclination whatever to doze or sleep, keeping vigil beside a dying woman.

An hour or more may have passed, during which time the gale raged intermittently. Now and again the wind seemed to howl itself into silence. During one of these lulls Mrs. Yellam became sensible of a strange alertness, a quickening of sensibilities and senses. Her hearing, for example, always acute, became painfully so. Suddenly she sat erect in her chair, gripping the arms. Upon the flagstones which led from the wicket-gate to the door of the cottage she thought she heard steps. And at the moment she could have sworn that they were her son's steps, heard ten thousand times upon those same stones. At the same instant Fancy moved and raised herself upon an elbow.

"I hear him!" she said excitedly. "Don't you, mother?"

But Mrs. Yellam heard nothing. She stared tremblingly at Fancy's transfigured face.

"He's coming upstairs, mother. Open the door."

Mrs. Yellam never moved. She could hear Fancy's voice—nothing else. She wanted to look at the door, but her gaze remained fixed upon Fancy's shining eyes.

The Empty Pew

"Alferd, I knew you'd come!"

Fancy held out her arms in an ecstasy. Then her speech became broken and faltering. "I did want you as never was, yes, I did. It was awful going through it without you. And it's a girl—what you wanted. How lovely you look, dear! Kiss me again! Hold me tight! If you don't, I—I may slip off——"

Her voice died away in sighs; her eyes closed; her head fell back upon the pillow. Mrs. Yellam rose to her feet. In an instant her strong arms were encircling the wasted body, clutching it to her, trying to hold Fancy back, but knowing that she was, as she said, slipping away. Fancy's voice had become an attenuated whisper.

"Alferd, dear, mother wanted you to come back as badly as I did. Tell me—however did you manage it?"

Mrs. Yellam listened, waiting, hoping, and almost believing that an answer would be forthcoming. She knew from the parson that her son had been killed by a shell—killed and *obliterated*. Very gently he had laid emphasis upon this. Death for Alfred Yellam must have been painless and instantaneous.

At that moment the grim old woman expected to hear the deep, familiar voice. Fancy, however, answered for him.

"Yes, yes," she whispered, "I hear you as plain as plain. What! *A shell?* Did it hurt you? It—didn't. But because of that you were able to come. You had to come, for both our sakes. . . . And such a night as 'tis. . . . You ain't a bit wet, neither. . . . Afraid, Alferd? . . . With you holding me tight as tight? . . . Oh, no."

Mrs. Yellam heard a tiny trickle of laughter. After that Fancy sighed twice, and then her small body relaxed.

She had slipped away.

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6

Dawn was stealing into the kitchen when Mrs. Yellam went downstairs. The first object that met her eye happened to be the Bible. She took it down and opened it furtively, as if ashamed. She glanced at the last entry, and an exclamation escaped her. She stared at the page. The last entry was not written, as she had supposed, against the name of Susan Yellam, but against the name of Fancy Yellam. . . .

She remembered, of course, that in her presumptuous, overwhelming haste to record her own death, she had forgotten to put on her spectacles.

And yet. . . . And yet. . . .

She fell upon her knees.

Next Sunday she was in her pew as usual.

